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Review

# Making peace with America

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**Subtitled "September 11, Causes and Consequences" Fred Halliday's book says little about the "two hours which shook the world", but is in fact an assessment of the international political factors which gave rise to the attack, notably the questions of Islamic fundamentalism, globalisation and United States capitalism.**

Halliday - now Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics - was until the end of the 1980s one of the foremost English language Marxist experts on the Middle East, and a long-time member of the New Left Review editorial board. His move away from the Left was signalled by his support for the US war on Iraq and his subsequent book *Rethinking International Relations*, in which he condemned attempts to seek a post-capitalist order, or indeed any attempt to rapidly improve the human condition.

His new book, despite some sensible and perceptive parts, eventually collapses into abject apology for modern capitalism in general and the United States in particular. In doing so, Halliday feels compelled to return time and again to criticising the Left - in other words his own former self.

Let's start with points of agreement. Halliday says a lot of sensible things about modern-day national questions. And, as a harsh critic of postmodernism, he insists on the necessity of human rights, reason, and indeed the values of the Enlightenment in general, against the forces of obscurantism and bigotry. The latter for Halliday reside particularly in Islamic and other religious fundamentalisms and, although he is much less detailed about this, right wing and racist forces in the West.

He strongly makes a distinction between Islam and Muslims in general, and the forces of fanatical "Islamism". In this context, Halliday rubbishes the theories of Samuel Huntington which seek to interpret the modern world in terms of a "clash of civilisations".

## Stereotype

Having rejected what he calls Western "Islamophobia", he pounces on the "other stereotype" - hostility towards the United States and its foreign policy. The following passage gives a flavour:

"For all its faults, the USA is, to date, the most prosperous country in human history, the one to which many people, possibly half the world, would like to emigrate and work, whose vitality in many fields, from music to medicine, outstrips all others. It must be doing something right." (p. 49).

Or again: "It has in regard to many issues, gender and immigration among them, a record which puts much of Western Europe to shame. Much is made, especially in recent days, of American militarism and belligerency: this is, the discourse of cowboy culture aside, a myth. No other major country has a record as cautious and restrained as the USA: it had to be dragged into World War in 1941, as it was dragged into Bosnia in 1995. The USA fought these wars in the 1990s - in Kuwait in 1991, Bosnia 1995, Kosovo 1999 - all in response to aggression against Muslim peoples."

One is tempted to ask, well was it 'dragged' into Korea or Vietnam, Grenada or Panama, Guatemala or the Lebanon

(twice), into bombing Libya or backing the contras in Nicaragua, or into the 60-odd other military interventions since World War 2?

Actually Halliday assesses US capitalism from the viewpoint of trying to add up the positive things and contrasting them with the negative factors, rather than trying to make an all-round assessment of its dynamics and world role.

His first list of negative things is instructive: "The USA is a country with a record, at home and abroad, that arouses criticism and indignation, in some cases rightly so: Vietnam, Nicaragua, the neglect of Palestinian rights, Cuba, the grotesque irresponsibility of its media and gun laws, the insidious role of religion and money in its public life, to name but some."

This off-the-cuff list of things which might be considered wrong with the US leaves out two that are surely more fundamental - the role of the US trans-national corporations and their exploitation of workers worldwide, and the horrendous criminal justice system - the vast American Gulag which imprisons over one million people, a majority of them people of colour, and imposes the death sentence (again mainly on people of colour). These are the 'negative' factors which go right to the heart of the system of production and social control.

## Direct hit

One thing Halliday does score a direct hit on is the snobbish attitude of sections of the West European intelligentsia - left and right - towards North America. The idea, often found among French intellectuals, that the sum total of the achievements of Anglo-Saxon culture is the hamburger, is way off the mark.

But West European hostility to the US is multi-faceted. It is not wrong to reject large chunks of American culture, and even Halliday is forced to admit that the US produces more rubbish than any other nation on earth (and much of it with a distinct ideological purpose it might be said).

And even among right-wing liberal democrats in Europe, hostility to the US often includes an element of rejection of the social values of Anglo-Saxon capitalism - i.e. the lack of a welfare state and health provision, the 'flexibility' of labour and lack of holidays, and the "new" management techniques - outsourcing, downsizing, give-backs - which propelled the 1990s US boom.

About these things - the life experience of huge sections of the US working class - Halliday has nothing to say. Neither is there any hint that US prosperity might have something to do with the vast imperial tribute gathered by the corporations and the banks from the rest of the world. These things implicate two categories which Halliday has jettisoned in his new world view: the capitalist class and imperialism.

In his discussion of globalization Halliday takes issue with the idea that the nation state is rapidly declining in power. He does this by assessing the ideas of the late Susan Strange: "...her argument is that power is increasingly structural, not unit-based, i.e. not focused on states. She identifies four power structures in the contemporary world - security, production, finance and knowledge. Only the first, security, is to a decreasing extent, monopolised by states."

## Point missed

Halliday then goes on to show that the state still has a strong role in the economy even in the US - particularly since September 11 - and in promoting research and development (pp183-6). He is quite right about this, but his discussion misses the point. The "power structures" - the military, the companies, the banks and other financial institutions, the public and private research centres - are not suspended in a vacuum counter-posed to the state. The state, and these four centres of power, are articulated together ("over-determined" in the Althusserian language which Halliday is very familiar with) by the existence of social classes, in particular by the existence of the capitalist class.

Post-war Marxism has had endless discussions about the "relative autonomy" of the state, i.e. its autonomy from social classes, and the bourgeoisie in particular. A brief glance at the USA today reveals that nowhere is the state less autonomous from the interests of the big corporations, the big banks and the capitalist class in general.

And this is intimately connected with the role of money in politics and the character of the media. But this is not discussed by Halliday because it contradicts the new world view he has adopted since ditching Marxism.

Towards the end of the book, Halliday appears to give ground to left wing critics of the US, somewhat in contradiction to his earlier statements. These passages reveal a lot about Halliday's implicit political programme. For example, "There are many aspects of US society that are, compared to Western Europe, pernicious - the absence of welfare programmes, the incidence of crime and drugs, the prevalence of fundamentalist religious bodies, to name but three...The USA, not least in the aftermath of the Gulf War, exhibits a strong vein of cultural and great power arrogance, but it is hardly for the British, the French, the Germans or even the Spaniards to claim superiority in that domain." (p168).

He even talks about a "series of illegal and imperialistic interventions by the US forces over the past decade" (p170), a somewhat different emphasis than the 'cautious and restrained' idea of US interventions earlier in the book. But, he argues, a balanced view has to incorporate other factors.

## Facile

First, on many things Europeans are no better (true, but so what?). Second, the left, including the American left, is prone to facile conspiracy theories, failing to record the real divisions in official US politics, which can be exploited for progressive ends. Third, US culture is not nearly so vulgar as people make out. Fourth, Europeans are inconsistent, cleaving to the Atlanticist dinosaur NATO, which they should break with. And fifth, the experience of US sanctions against South Africa, and the records of the Clinton government, shows that a constructive engagement with the US foreign policy elite is possible.

To denounce them all as imperialists and enemies is infantile. Thus: "The need for a more measured political assessment of the USA is a matter of great urgency the world over, for two reasons."

The two reasons turn out to be one reason: the collapse of communism has left the US as the only world superpower, with unparalleled power and influence. Thus:

"If the Left is going to come up with a coherent and plausible assessment of the US, it has to recognise that the masses of the world want to go and live there. There is little point in telling the people of Albania, or China and Mexico that they are victims of false consciousness. Secondly, the USA has today greater military and strategic power than at any time since World War II. It is easy to overstate this, but wrong to ignore it: the question posed for

people inside the USA and those who have to deal with it from without is in what ways, small or large, that influence can be put to better rather than worse use, be this North-South economic relations, the field of human rights, in that of intervention or a new potentially non-hegemonic security system in Europe.

"Those in Europe, and the US, who have long sustained a critique of US society and US foreign policy would be well advised to break with their often too comfortable denunciations and take the opportunities which now present themselves. We may well miss the opportunity. The forces within the USA and outside which want to enhance the more oppressive and hierarchical character of the world will certainly not." (p173).

## Dialogue

Fred Halliday evidently wrote his before the war on Afghanistan had begun, but I have to say at first blush it seems difficult to imagine how one would conduct a dialogue with Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pearle and Donald Rumsfeld, but then I'm obviously just not getting the point. His conception of democrats and progressives pressuring the existing powers in the US through constructive dialogue is utopian through and through; insofar as leftists can bring pressure to bear it is through campaigning and mass movements of opposition, in the US itself and internationally, not by a polite dialogue.

Halliday wants to square the circle; he wants justice, freedom and human rights, but if he looks to the existing US power structure to get them he is doomed to perpetual disappointment.

Really fundamental questions lie beneath Halliday's view of the world, and they involve the role of existing states, social classes and social movements. Fred Halliday was always regarded by sections of the non-Stalinist left in Britain as having a rather "Sovietic" bent.

He fervently argued in defence of the Russians in Afghanistan (there is a picture in the book of him with Afghan government troops in 1980). His harsh criticisms of Soviet society in *The Making of the Second Cold War* have to be taken with his early 1980s articles in the *Eurocommunist Marxism Today* arguing that the Brezhnev era was one of substantial progress for the USSR domestically and internationally, something which in retrospect was quite false. In that period Halliday seemed to have a "realist" attitude to leftwing advance, which accorded central importance to the apparently continued vitality and progressive world role of the USSR and its allies.

## Speculative

There is an explanation for this, although a little speculative. One of Fred Halliday's literary projects not mentioned in the long list at the front of the book, is his editorship of a collection of writings by Isaac Deutscher, *Russia, China and the West*; Halliday clearly saw himself as a pupil of Deutscher.

Deutscher of course was a militant anti-Stalinist, and we now know he wrote articles in the 1960s under a pseudonym for the theoretical magazine of the Socialist Labour League, at the time the main Trotskyist organisation in Britain - with whom he later broke over their use of violence.

Nothing justifies the ignorant abuse which Deutscher suffered from sectarians for having allegedly 'capitulated to Stalinism'. But it is true that in Deutscher's writings there is an ambiguous strand, and his last book *The Unfinished*

Revolution (1967) espouses considerable confidence (hope?) for the self-reform of the Soviet system. This is also the import of the last chapter of his biography of Trotsky (see "Victory in Defeat", The Prophet Outcast, OUP). Certainly, different emphases on the Soviet question were found among people who regarded themselves as pupils of Deutscher. But for Halliday at least the main divide and conflict in the world was between two state systems, east and west, and not between two main classes worldwide, the capitalist class and the working class (this is explained at length in *The Making of the Second Cold War* and his 1982 essay *The Sources of the New Cold War*).

His break with Marxism, at any rate, occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The collapse of this, for Halliday progressive, state power convinced him that communism and socialism were utopias, an idea re-expounded in this present book (pp181-2). This makes him broadly sympathetic to the ideas of Francis Fukuyama and leads him to the conclusion that "Liberal democracy and regulated markets do provide a broad context for benign development" (p192).

It's not a big surprise then that Halliday has turned to arguing for a dialogue with and an attempt to shift in progressive directions, the most powerful state power which does exist. In this process social movements and NGOs can play a role, but a small one. Class based and socialist movements are simply not discussed, nor is the significance of the post-Seattle global justice movement.

## Bizarre

Paradoxically, indeed a little bizarrely, Halliday explains at great length the unequal and unjust situation between states and expresses the hope that "capitalism itself will learn from this". Any realistic assessment must conclude this hope is a forlorn one.

Halliday finishes on a deliberately provocative note: "Above all, reason and insistence on universal values will...be essential. The centre must hold." This is in part a reference to W. B. Yeats' poem ,quoted earlier in the book "Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." But when Halliday says "the centre", he means it. It is the political centre inhabited by post-Communist and post-social democratic parties, by progressive Democrats in the US, by Democrazia de la Sinistra (DS) in Italy, the Blairites in Britain, the SPD in Germany, by Halliday's boss at the London School of Economics Anthony Giddens and all the proponents of the seemingly defunct "Third Way". Between all these there are many disagreements, but one focus of agreement: there is no alternative to capitalism, it can only be regulated and humanised. Forget your utopias and prepare to negotiate with those in power. For someone with the critical intelligence and depth of Marxist culture once possessed by Fred Halliday, this is a terrible collapse.