Review Articles

The Return of Cosmopolitan Capital: Globalization, the State and War
NIGEL HARRIS
Reviewed by PETER GREEN

The Return of Cosmopolitan Capital confirms that Nigel Harris has lost none of his intellectual ambition or stylistic panache. In the course of less than three hundred pages, Harris attempts a survey of the origins and transformations of a capitalism he dates back several thousand years. In the process, he seeks to challenge what he regards as the Marxist orthodoxy about the relationship between capital, states and war and provide a survey of ‘the new world order’ and debates over globalisation. Yet this is a book which is a pleasure to read, the product of a lifetime’s work, summarising a mass of material with magisterial concision and thought-provoking finesse.

What is at stake is not just an academic argument about the past. The Return of Cosmopolitan Capital marks the culmination of Harris’s long journey from a commitment to international socialism to the politics of cosmopolitan liberalism. Like Meghnad Desai, whose approving comment is quoted on the flysheet, Harris now believes that ‘capitalism is the only game in town’.1 If Desai is curiously anxious to wear the mantle of Marx himself for this claim, whilst Harris is rather more self-conscious of his breach with tradition, the former Stalinist and one-time unorthodox Trotskyist are united now in what might be termed, somewhat anachronistically, global Menshevism. Capitalism, they would both argue, is far from exhausting its potential for developing the forces of production. It has survived the crises of the twentieth century and is now once again in a new phase of expansion. For Harris, in particular, we are now seeing the ‘real bourgeois revolution’ or ‘the establishment of the power of world markets and businessmen over the states of the world’ (p. 264). To resist this process,

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1 The quote is from Desai (2002, p. 303) not from Harris but could equally well have come from the latter. For a highly critical take on Desai see the review by Kiely 2003, who locates him as a ‘market fetishist’. The same could be said of Harris, but the book under review has much more historical substance than Desai’s rather gossipy ramble through twentieth-century Marxist debates. Kiely, however, fails to emphasise the truth in Desai’s depiction of Marx as a prophet of globalisation.
to be ‘anti-globalisation’, regardless of the intentions of those involved, amounts to an alignment with the forces of the old order, the world of war-making nation-states. There is, he implies, no other choice on the world-historical agenda.

Nobody familiar with Harris’s work over the last twenty years should be surprised by one of the central themes of this work – a stress on the emergence of a new world order characterised most fundamentally by the globalisation of capital, a process still ‘partial and uneven’ but nonetheless inexorably undermining the old ‘state-centric’ order. *Of Bread and Guns*, published twenty years earlier in 1983, was a prophetic work in its emphasis, unusual at the time, but now of course commonplace, on the internationalisation of capital and the weakening of the power of national states.² Some have still been shocked by the degree of enthusiasm with which Harris now embraces globalisation as offering, to quote from the final paragraph of the book,³

> an immense vision of hope for the world – to escape from the domination of states and their preoccupation simply with national power and in the past, war. . . . Not only can world incomes grow far faster in an economically integrated system, growing wealth and the ending of the national constraints on people’s behaviour has the power to release very much more human creativity. (p. 264.)

The specific claims will be explored critically at more length below. But, when Harris identifies ‘. . . xenophobia – and its ugly children: racism, religious bigotry, chauvinism and all the other varieties of chronic or mild patriotism [as] the cancer of a global civilisation, the AIDS of the new world order’ (p. ix), he should be applauded. In his other recently published work, *Thinking the Unthinkable*, Harris has exposed with much passion and polemical effect the iniquities and irrationality of immigration controls in a world of globalising capital.⁴ The audience may have changed, as Harris now addresses himself to the fora of the American University in Cairo (where parts of the work were first delivered as lectures) and the World Bank rather than the revolutionary Left. But we should acknowledge a consistency of focus, hostility to all the manifestations of nationalism, which can be traced back to the politics of his youth and the inspirational internationalism of the *Communist Manifesto*.⁵ Along with Hardt and Negri in *Empire*,

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² Harris 1983. It is time to acknowledge that the review I wrote at the time failed to adequately recognise the prescience now evident in *Of Bread and Guns*. But the criticisms of Harris’s tendency to counterpose the market to the destructive powers of nation-states were much more accurate and far-sighted (Green 1983).
³ See Marfleet 2004 for an expression of shock and understandable indignation from a former comrade. Marfleet however fails to address clearly the fundamental issue of the contemporary globalisation of capital which is central to the second half of the book. Harris’s vigorous response scores points but also reveals more explicitly the fissures with his past, and the political trajectory which has converged with neoliberal thought, although combined with a leaning towards forms of global governance shared with Desai. See Harris 2004.
⁴ Harris 2002.
⁵ Harris 1990 provides an illuminating account of the Marxist tradition on the question of nationalism with a conclusion which deplores the way in which an internationalist theory was turned into an ideology of nationalism in the twentieth century. But, in that work, Harris was