Marxism, the International Committee, and the science of perspective: an historical analysis of the crisis of American imperialism

Part One

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When one considers the amount of money that is sloshing around in the investment accounts of these people, the size of the charitable contributions coming out of the United States that have been reported in the media does not seem to be all that impressive. One can be sure that the average working class contributor is donating a far larger percentage of his or her weekly income to relief efforts than the corporate executives who, before writing a check, talk the matter over with their accountants and calculate the tax benefits.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, there have been a number of articles in the press explaining the geological causes of the disaster. This is important scientific information. But it needs to be supplemented by analyses of the significant social factors that constitute a major causal element in the horrendous loss of life. This task is generally avoided by the media, which finds it easier to pontificate on the inscrutability of nature’s awful purposes. Thus, we are informed by columnist David Brooks of the New York Times: “Humans are not the universe’s main concern. We’re just gnats on the crust of the earth. The earth shrugs and 140,000 gnats die, victims of forces far larger and more permanent than themselves.” Commentary of this sort—which is composed in equal parts of ignorance and contempt for humanity—serves a definite purpose: to evade reality and conceal unpleasant socioeconomic and political truths.

The impact of the tsunami exposes in an especially graphic manner the irrational nature of capitalism, its inability to develop the productive forces in a manner that raises the living standards of the broad masses of the people. The media enthuses about the “Asian miracle,” but the fact of the matter is that the benefits of the infusion of capital into the region over the past decade are showered upon small privileged elites. Hundreds of millions of Asia’s people live in shanties that, even under the most favorable climatic conditions, afford scant protection from the elements. It testifies to the inhumane character of economic development in the region that a disaster that cost the lives of more than 150,000 people is not considered by the international financial community to be a major economic event. The stock exchanges in the region—including those of Indonesia, Thailand, India and even Sri Lanka—have not suffered any economic event. The stock exchanges in the region designed to kill people—particularly in Iraq—the figure of $350 million amounts to little more than pocket change.

In fact, $350 million is only a small percentage of the total amount of money paid out annually to the top 500 American CEOs in the form of salaries and stock options. This figure runs well into the billions of dollars. In 2003, the total compensation of Charles M. Cawley of MBNA exceeded $45 million; that of Stanley O’Neal of Merrill Lynch was $28.3 million; that of Daniel P. Amos of Aflac was $37.3 million; that of Kenneth L. Chenault of American Express was $40 million; that of Patrick Stokes of Anheuser Busch was $49 million. I selected these names somewhat randomly from a list of about 1,000 executives published on a web site that tracks corporate compensation.[1]
referring to the events of October 1, 1965. On that day, the CIA, working
with fascistic Indonesian military officers led by General Suharto,
organized a coup that removed the left-nationalist president, Sukarno,
from power. In the aftermath of the coup, military personnel and right-
wing Muslim religious death squads, operating with lists supplied by the
CIA, slaughtered over a half million members of the Indonesian
Communist Party and other left-wing groups. For the next three decades,
General Suharto’s brutally repressive US-backed regime kept Indonesia
safe for capitalist investment. The chaotic and destructive nature of
capitalist development culminated in the financial tsunami that devastated
Indonesia’s economy in 1998.

As for Sri Lanka, long before the tsunami swept over its vulnerable
coastline, the country had been devastated by the reactionary and
chauvinist policies of successive bourgeois governments. The
development of critical social infrastructure had been subordinated to the
financial demands of a civil war provoked by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

When examined in its true socioeconomic and political context, it
becomes clear that the destructive impact of a tsunami is far more the
consequence of man’s work than that of nature.

At some point in the future, the development of science and technology
should enable humanity to master nature to such an extent that it would be
inconceivable that a force so elemental and primitive as a tsunami could
extinguish thousands of lives. At the very least, man should be able to
foresee such an event in a manner that would allow life-saving counter-
measures. Indeed, we know that such technology exists and is in place
throughout the Pacific. The point is, the mastery by man of nature depends
upon his mastery of the socio-economic foundations of his own existence,
on the abolition of all elements of irrationality from the economic
structure of society—that is, upon the replacement of capitalism with
socialism.

In the prevailing environment of political reaction, with its stifling
impact on people’s emotions and intellect, the possibility of such a
transformation seems impossibly remote—which is one of the indications
that historical conditions for that very transformation are rapidly maturing.
Indeed, there are growing indications as we begin a new year that world
capitalism is entering into a new period of economic crisis and political
upheaval. The task before this meeting is to make as accurate an appraisal
as possible of the world situation, to judge on this basis the real prospects
for socialism, and determine the political tasks that flow from this
appraisal. This work is of a scientific character.

In April 1933, Leon Trotsky wrote a letter to Sidney Hook, challenging
certain formulations in an essay entitled “Marxism—Dogma or Method?”
which the young radical professor had written for the Nation. Hook had
written that Marxism “is neither a dogma, myth, nor objective science, but
a realistic method of class action.” To which Trotsky replied, “What
means here the word ‘realistic?’ Obviously, it means based upon the true
knowledge of the objective—in that case, social processes; the knowledge
of the objective is a science. The Marxian policy is realistic insofar as it is
based on Marxism as a science.”

Trotsky’s conception—that the formulation of political perspectives is
scientific work—contains within itself the premise that political processes
unfold in a lawful manner. This attitude is anathema to all pragmatic
varieties of anti-Marxism, which elevate contingency and accident to the
level of the absolute in the historical process, which insist that history and
politics are determined, in the final analysis, by the interplay of accidents
and a limitless number of unforeseeable and/or unpredictable variables.

The late Francois Furet, a historian who had once been a member of the
French Communist Party, summed up this viewpoint as follows: “A true
understanding of our time is possible only when we free ourselves from
the illusion of necessity: the only way to explain the twentieth century, to
the extent an explanation is possible, is to reassert its unpredictable
character, an attribute denied by those most responsible for its tragedies.”

Furet’s argument unfolds within a very rigid framework: as it is not
possible to predict the future with any significant level of certainty, it is
absurd to speak of historical necessity. For Furet, necessity implies the
existence of irresistible forces that lead to one and only one conceivable
outcome. As it is clear that the path of historical development may lead to
different and even quite contradictory outcomes, the conviction that the
historical process is subject to laws, and that, moreover, these laws can be
understood and acted upon, constitutes a Marxist illusion. It should come
as no surprise that Furet’s diatribe against historical determinism is made
within the context of a book-length polemic devoted to establishing the
absolute necessity of capitalism now and for all time.

The position of Furet, quite common among anti-Marxists, reveals a
naive misunderstanding of what is signified by the concept of law and
necessity. The scientific character of Marxism is not determined by the
exactness of its predictions. The degree of exactness that Marxism or any
scientific discipline can attain in its description of any given phenomenon
is determined ultimately by the nature of the phenomenon itself. The
objective nature of the phenomenon that is the subject of history—human
society—is not of a character that would enable even the most
conscientious historical materialist to “predict” exactly what will happen
two days, two weeks, or two months hence. This is not an argument
against the lawfulness of the historical process or the possibility of its
scientific study. Rather, it requires a more profound appreciation of how
lawfulness is manifested in the historical process. As Lukács explained,
“scientific laws can only fulfill themselves in the real world as tendencies,
and necessities only in the tangle of opposing forces, only in a mediation
that takes place by way of endless accidents.”

That the outcome of the historical process is not predetermined, that its
development may move in various directions, is a consequence of the fact
that social evolution proceeds through the struggle of classes, which are in
pursuit of different, mutually incompatible ends. But neither the classes as
a whole nor the parties and individuals through which their socioeconomic
interests find more or less adequate expression function as free agents.
The breadth and nature of their activity are essentially defined by the laws
of the capitalist mode of production.

This is true not only for the working class, but for the bourgeois ruling
elite as well. The political perspective of our party does not proceed from
subjectively motivated hopes and desires. Marxists conceive of revolution
neither as punishment for the evil-doings of capitalists, nor as reward for
their own altruistic efforts to abolish poverty. The perspectives of the
revolutionary party must develop out of an analysis of the objectively real
contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. This analysis forms
the most general basis of the revolutionary perspective. Its more detailed
elaboration requires that the development of these contradictions, in their
real-life social and political expression, be traced through the many layers
of historical, social, cultural and intellectual mediation through which they
must pass.

A Marxist perspective may concern itself with broad historical processes
spanning decades, or a more immediate set of concrete political conditions
in which the time frame of revolutionary action is of far briefer duration.
But even in the latter case, the reference point of the Marxist party is
always the broader historical process. The tactics that are devised to meet
the exigencies of the conjunctural problems and circumstances must be in
accordance with the principled aims that are defined by the historic
program and tasks of the international socialist movement. It should be
added that it is not possible to understand conjunctural problems and
conditions unless they are studied within the framework of the strategic
goals defined by the nature of the historical epoch.

Finally, the development of revolutionary perspectives requires an
active, rather than contemplative, attitude toward society and the class
struggle. Objectivity does not mean passivity. The revolutionary party’s
appraisal of objective reality and the balance of class forces includes an estimate of the impact and consequences of its own intervention in the revolutionary process. The correct interpretation of the world, as Marx explained in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, can be developed only in the struggle to change it.

But the correct appreciation of the “active” element in the process of cognition—whose discovery and elucidation constituted one of the great achievements of German classical idealist philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (above all, in the work of Hegel)—must not be taken to mean that the objective world can be changed and reshaped anyway one pleases. There exists no philosophical tendency with more dangerously reactionary implications than one that separates the activity of “the will” from the scientific cognition of objective, law-governed social processes that are the essential determinants of man’s social practice. The activity of the revolutionary party must proceed from a correct appraisal of the basic tendencies of socioeconomic development on a world scale. Unless grounded in this foundation, the work of the revolutionary movement will rest on nothing more substantial than impressions and guess work...and it will end in disaster.

To be continued

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