

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

Part One

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On the weekend of January 8-9, the Socialist Equality Party held a meeting of its national membership in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The opening report was given by David North, the national secretary of the SEP and chairman of the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site. The report will be published in three parts. The first part appears below; the second will be published tomorrow; the final part will be posted on Thursday, January 13.

In opening this national meeting of the membership of the Socialist Equality Party, it is appropriate that we observe a minute of silence to pay tribute to the memories of the tens of thousands of people in South Asia who perished last month in the tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean.

All across the globe there has been an outpouring of deeply felt empathy for the victims of the tsunami, as well as genuine expressions of solidarity. How different these manifestations of real grief are from the grudging, hypocritical and pro-forma expressions of concern on the part of the leaders of American and British imperialism! Neither Bush nor Blair was capable of articulating, in a manner that anyone could find convincing, concern for the fate of the millions of people whose lives have been devastated by the catastrophe.

Even the media was embarrassed by the manner in which the White House responded—or, to be more precise, failed to respond—to the unfolding tragedy. First, the extraordinary silence, which persisted for nearly three days, as the president pattered around his Texas ranch and the British prime minister looked after his tan on an Egyptian beach, all but oblivious to the consequences of the tsunami. Then came Bush's piddling offer of \$15 million in aid, grudgingly raised to \$35 million, and, later, as the White House's stinginess became the subject of international derision, upped further to \$350 million. Of course, when compared to the sums expended by the United States in operations 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. Chennault 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]

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 significant decline in the aftermath of the tsunami. The reason is that large segments of the population of these countries live in a state of such dire poverty that their relationship to the national economy is of a tangential character.

The social conditions that exist in these countries must be related to their political histories. Let us look at the countries that suffered the greatest losses last week: Indonesia and Sri Lanka. It is impossible to understand the nature of modern Indonesian society—the appalling poverty, widespread malnutrition, a life expectancy for men of under 65—without

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." [2]

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."

[3]

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 naïve 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." [4]

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

Notes:

1. <http://www.aflcio.com/corporateamerica/paywatch/ceou/database.cfm>
2. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1932-33* (New York, 1972), pp. 232-33.
3. *The Passing of an Illusion* (Chicago 1999), p. 2.
4. *The Ontology of Social Being*, Volume 2 (London, 1978), p. 103.



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