The Malthusian underpinnings of Boris Johnson's "herd immunity" strategy

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's name will forever be associated with the murderous strategy of "herd immunity."

A policy now universally followed by the world's ruling classes was first openly advocated in response to the coronavirus pandemic by Johnson's government, where it found a fitting representative in a prime minister who embodies the most reactionary traditions of British imperialism. Johnson's actions have stripped bare the fundamental savagery of a social order based on the accumulation of profit by a super-rich oligarchy, in a way that will never be forgotten or forgiven by the working class.

On March 13, two days after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, Johnson's Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance suggested publicly that the population could "build up some kind of herd immunity so more people are immune to this disease and we reduce the transmission." Johnson had spelt out the practicalities of this policy in an interview the week before, where he explained, "one of the theories is, that perhaps you could take it on the chin, take it all in one go and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population."

The general concept of herd immunity has a legitimate scientific background, referring to the immunisation of a sufficient percentage of the population to block transmission of and therefore contain and eradicate a virus. But with serious diseases, such immunity has only ever been conceived of as the result of mass vaccination programmes. To rely on individuals developing natural immunity through contact with the virus not only fails to guarantee effective resistance to infection, through the development of lasting antibodies. It also presupposes the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people who do not survive the disease. This is exactly what the British government intended.

In keeping with their plan, no significant public health measures were put in place as the pandemic spread rapidly internationally and throughout Europe. No lockdown was imposed, and major sports events were allowed to go ahead. On March 12, the government abandoned any thought of containing the virus through community tracing and quarantining. Asked on Sky News why UK society was carrying on as normal when high infection rates would lead to an unprecedented number of deaths, Vallance replied, "Well of course we do face the prospect, as the prime minister said yesterday, of an increasing number of people dying."

What was being prepared was a slaughter. On March 2, a report to the government's Science Advice Group for Emergencies (SAGE) warned that coronavirus was highly contagious and already spreading in the population. If "stringent measures" were not imposed it would result in "around 80% of the population [53 million people] becoming infected," resulting in 250,000 to 500,000 deaths.

A national lockdown was only implemented *three weeks later*, on March 23, under massive popular pressure and amid widespread repugnance and anger at the pronouncements of the government. Ever since, the government has been working with big business and the trade unions to get the policy reversed so that now a criminal policy of an unsafe return to work is underway.

"Herd immunity" is not a public health strategy. It is a policy of culling the vulnerable, while defending the economic interests of the ruling elite—a sociopathic prioritisation of profit over life. According to a senior Conservative, it was summarised by Johnson's adviser Dominic Cummings as "herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad."

Johnson's supporters in the right-wing media have openly championed the same agenda. On March 13, fascistic columnist Katie Hopkins tweeted, "Coronavirus is a team sport. Get it. Get immunity. Feel better. The herd triumphs. Do not fear death. Everyone has an end."

On March 31, Toby Young wrote in the *Sceptic*, "spending £350 billion to prolong the lives of a few hundred thousand mostly elderly people is an irresponsible use of taxpayers' money." *Telegraph* economics editor Russell Lynch published an article declaring, "The cost of saving lives in this lockdown is too high."

The bloody balance sheet of this policy is that Britain has the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 outside of the United States, with its far bigger population. The death toll is set to explode as the population is sent back to work without even the most minimal public health protections in place.

Boris Johnson and "global over-population"

The Johnson government is reviving and putting into practice the most barbaric of social theories. A valuable insight into the conceptions guiding the government's response to COVID-19 is to be found in a hitherto obscure opinion piece written by Johnson for the *Daily Telegraph* in 2007. The article is titled, "Global over-population is the real issue." In it, Johnson laments how "it is a tragic measure of how far the world has changed" that "the fertility of the human race" can no longer be publicly discussed as a government policy.

"We seem to have given up on population control, and all sorts of explanations are offered for the surrender. Some say Indira Gandhi gave it all a bad name, by her demented plan to sterilise Indian men with the lure of a transistor radio.

"Some attribute our complacency to the Green Revolution, which seemed to prove Malthus wrong. It became the received wisdom that the world's population could rise to umpteen billions, as mankind learnt to make several ears of corn grow where one had grown before."

What this means, says Johnson, is that society is "refusing to say anything sensible about the single biggest challenge facing the Earth; and no, whatever it might now be conventional to say, the single biggest challenge is not global warming. The primary challenge facing our species is the reproduction of our species itself."

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Attributing this situation to "political cowardice," Johnson agitates, "It is time we had a grown-up discussion about the optimum quantity of human beings in this country and on this planet. … Isn't it time politicians stopped being so timid, and started talking about the real number one issue?"

Johnson makes no real effort to conceal the fascistic character of his views. He writes that "we have reached the absurd position in which humanity bleats about the destruction of the environment, and yet there is not a peep in any communiqué from any summit of the EU, G8 or UN about the population growth that is causing that destruction.

"You can see it as you fly over Mexico City, a vast checkerboard of smog-bound, low-rise dwellings stretching from one horizon to the other; and when you look down on what we are doing to the planet, you have a horrifying vision of habitations multiplying and replicating like bacilli in a Petri dish."

More than all the tame "investigations" of the corporate media, this article gets to the core of the British government's murderous response to the coronavirus pandemic. Social inequality, poverty, wars and the gutting of social services are non-issues to Johnson. Any measures to address them, let alone a global pandemic, would be counterproductive: the workers in the slums of Mexico City (or anywhere else)—"replicating like bacilli in a Petri dish"—are the real virus.

The thrust of Johnson's article turns on the reference to Thomas Malthus, a capitalist ideologue of the late 18th and early 19th century who argued that the "inevitability" of overpopulation made poverty and early death necessary for the poor. Johnson embraces this claim with his declaration that history only "*seemed* to prove Malthus wrong."

While he is blunter and appears stupider than most of his fellow capitalist politicians, Johnson was educated at Eton public school and Oxford University. He knows the intellectual and political smoke signal he is sending to his co-thinkers.

Since its first articulation, Malthusianism has performed a vital and vicious political function for the social layer in which Johnson is thoroughly enmeshed.

As leading German Marxist August Bebel explained in 1879, Malthus's work "contained an explanation of existing evils that expressed the innermost thoughts and wishes of the ruling classes, and justified them before the world." Namely, that while property and wealth righteously insulate the ruling class from the ravages of hunger and disease, the working class, as little more than beasts of burden for the capitalists and the landowners, should expect no such relief. The elite can live luxurious lives for as long as the labour of society can sustain them, but death for an old or infirm worker becomes "natural" at the point they can no longer meet their commitment to their betters.

Today the toll of the pandemic is viewed as a supposedly natural "check" on sections of the population considered a drain on profits. That is the content of "herd immunity."

Thomas Malthus and "population theory"

Born to a country gentleman, Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) was a fellow of Cambridge University, a curate in the Church of England and later a professor in the private college established by the East India Company to train its administrators. He became a fundamental figure in bourgeois politics with his publication of *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* in 1798.

Malthus argued:

> The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind [wars, for example] are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.

All social problems were resolved into the problem of a perpetual excess of people who, if left unchecked by society, would be "naturally" killed off by "sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague."

On pain of these catastrophes, Malthus advocated punitive measures of population control and insisted on the futility of the rich supporting a "redundant population." He demanded "moral restraint," preventing the poor from having too many children, an end to the Poor Law system of relief for the destitute, and only the most selective private charity.

This was a justification for the unrestrained operation of the capitalist profit system, whatever its devastating consequences for the working class.

The "law of population" is an ahistorical nonsense. Karl Marx declared it a "libel on the human race," delivering a scathing criticism of the "abstract numerical relation, which [Malthus] has fished purely out of thin air, and which rests neither on natural nor on historical laws."

As Marx would later demonstrate in *Capital*, contemporary poverty and unemployment are a consequence not of "overpopulation" but of the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist, which produces an "Accumulation of wealth at one pole" and an "accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole."

Malthus, Marx explained, sought to disguise this reality with an "apologia for the poverty of the working classes." He gave "brutal expression to the brutal viewpoint of capital" that if workers could not maintain themselves or their children in the "struggle for existence," to use Malthus's terms, they should expect no support. The worker "has no work, hence no wages, and since he has no existence as a human being but only as a worker, he can go and bury himself, starve to death, etc."

The concluding chapter of Malthus's essay includes the statement:

> That the principal and most permanent cause of poverty has little or no direct relation to forms of government, or the unequal division of property; and that, as the rich do not in reality possess the power of finding employment and maintenance for the poor, the poor cannot, in the nature of things, possess the right to demand them; are important truths flowing from the principle of population…

This ghoulish theory was advanced in opposition to the struggle of the masses for an improvement in their position. "A mob," the bourgeois academic trembles, "is of all monsters the most fatal to freedom." Malthus's essay was first published in 1798, the year of the United Irishman uprising, and the next three editions in the years leading up to the 1819 massacre of workers protesting for parliamentary representation at Peterloo, Manchester. The fifth edition was published in 1830.

Malthus declared himself an enemy of the Enlightenment arguments for equality recently given explosive actuality in the American and French

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Revolutions. In the course of his original essay and subsequent editions, he attacked the British utopian anarchist William Godwin, utopian socialist Robert Owen, radical democrat Thomas Paine and the French revolutionary Nicholas de Condorcet. Against egalitarian arguments demanding fair access to basic social rights, Malthus provided the ruling class with a crude ideological club to justify the impoverishment and premature death of the poor as the natural order of things. He was rewarded with immediate and immense influence in ruling circles.

As Marx explained:

> The great sensation this pamphlet caused, was due solely to party interest. The French Revolution had found passionate defenders in the United Kingdom; the "principle of population," slowly worked out in the eighteenth century, and then, in the midst of a great social crisis, proclaimed with drums and trumpets as the infallible antidote to the teachings of Condorcet, &c., was greeted with jubilance by the English oligarchy as the great destroyer of all hankerings after human development.

Malthus theoretically enshrined the principle that the working class has no right to life except as a disposable labour force for the capitalist class. He argued, "There is one right which man has generally been thought to possess which I am confident he neither does nor can possess—a right to subsistence when his labour will not fairly purchase it … no person has any claim of right on society for subsistence, if his labour will not purchase it."

In the second version of his essay, Malthus stated his savage views so boldly that the following passage had to be removed in subsequent editions: "A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him."

Friedrich Engels subjected Malthus's legacy to a devastating exposure in his 1843 *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, in words that resound with full force today:

> Malthus … maintains that population is always pressing on the means of subsistence; that as soon as production increases, population increases in the same proportion; and that the inherent tendency of the population to multiply in excess of the available means of subsistence is the root of all misery and all vice. For, when there are too many people, they have to be disposed of in one way or another: either they must be killed by violence or they must starve. … The implications of this line of thought are that since it is precisely the poor who are the surplus, nothing should be done for them except to make their dying of starvation as easy as possible, and to convince them that it cannot be helped and that there is no other salvation for their whole class than keeping propagation down to the absolute minimum. … Charity is to be considered a crime, since it supports the augmentation of the surplus population. Indeed, it will be very advantageous to declare poverty a crime and to turn poor-houses into prisons, as has already happened in England as a result of the new "liberal" Poor Law…
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> Am I to go on any longer elaborating this vile, infamous theory, this hideous blasphemy against nature and mankind? Am I to pursue its consequences any further? Here at last we have the immorality of the economist brought to its highest pitch. … And it is just this theory which is the keystone of the liberal system of free trade, whose fall entails the downfall of the entire edifice. For if here competition is proved to be the cause of misery, poverty and crime, who then will still dare to speak up for it?

Engels noted that in 1834, just a few months before the death of Malthus, his writings were used to justify a reform of the Poor Law system designed to curb the minimal cost to ratepayers of maintaining the destitute. Relief payments were replaced with the hellish workhouse system. Men, women, and children were separated and forced to live and work in prison-like conditions. Support was withdrawn from the mothers of "illegitimate" children.

Just over a decade later, the Malthusian claim of the inevitability and benefit of catastrophic "checks" on the population, and of the inability of society to avert their consequences, justified the British government's genocidal response to Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-49. A million people starved to death and a million more were forced to emigrate while the British ruling class insisted that the free operation of the market could not be interfered with. Even as Ireland's potato crop was destroyed by blight, vast quantities of food continued to be exported for sale.

The Whig government's Assistant Secretary to the Treasury Charles Trevelyan thought the famine was an "effective mechanism for reducing surplus population" and a "direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence" sent to reform the "selfish, perverse and turbulent" Irish. Trevelyan had studied under Malthus.

Mutatis Mutandis, there is nothing to distinguish the actions of the Whigs in the mid-19th century from Johnson's Tories during the pandemic of 2020.

Malthus, social Darwinism and eugenics

Malthus was foundational to the "survival of the fittest" theories of social Darwinism and eugenics in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the most prominent social Darwinist, refers in *A Theory on Population, deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility*, to a "constant increase of people beyond the means of subsistence," an "excess of fertility which entails a constant pressure of population upon the means of subsistence." Going further than Malthus's idea of a "struggle for existence," however, he concluded:

> Necessarily, families and races whom this increasing difficulty of getting a living which excess of fertility entails, does not stimulate to improvements in production—that is, to greater mental activity—are on the high road to extinction; and must ultimately be supplanted by those whom the pressure does so stimulate. This truth we have recently seen exemplified in Ireland. And here, indeed, without further illustration, it will be seen that premature death, under all its forms, and from all its causes, cannot fail to work in the same direction. For as those prematurely carried off must, in the average of cases, be those in whom the power of self-preservation is the least, it unavoidably follows, that those left behind to continue the race are those in whom the power of self-preservation is the greatest—are the select of their generation.

This new ideological step towards barbarism was a response to a new sharpening of class tensions. Spencer wrote following the storms of

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working class Chartism, the European revolutions of 1848 and the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, and in the midst of Britain's "imperial century," founded on the brutal subjugation and exploitation of India, China and other colonies. Faced with a strengthening working class and the emergence of the socialist movement, Spencer was driven to write a full-blooded defence, again citing a supposed natural law, of inequality, oppression, and imperialist violence.

In his book *Social Statistics*, he attacked socialism's "erroneous … assertions of a man's right to a maintenance and of his right to have his work provided for him." The prominent contemporary economist and Spencer disciple Alfred Marshall, wrote in the same spirit that social welfare might lead to "Some partial arrest of that selective influence of struggle and competition … to which more than any other single cause, the progress of the human race is due."

The ruling class showered Spencer with praise; he sold over a million copies of his works in his own lifetime. Social Darwinism "proved" to the elite its belief that not only was the working class undeserving of support, but that its suffering and premature death was of active benefit to "society" and "the human race"—by which they understood their own bank accounts. A sickening passage in *Social Statistics* reads:

> Meanwhile the well-being of existing humanity, and the unfolding of it into this ultimate perfection, are both secured by that same beneficent, though severe discipline, to which the animate creation at large is subject. … The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many "in shallows and in miseries," are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence. It seems hard that an unskilfulness which with all his efforts he cannot overcome, should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seems hard that a labourer incapacitated by sickness from competing with his stronger fellows, should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death.
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> Nevertheless, when regarded not separately, but in connection with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of the highest beneficence—the same beneficence which brings to early graves the children of diseased parents, and singles out the low-spirited, the intemperate, and the debilitated as the victims of an epidemic.

In the context of the worsening inter-imperialist tensions, economic turmoil and class struggles of the late 19th and early 20th century, social Darwinism spawned the eugenicist movement, whose founder, Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), promised, "What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly."

Eugenics offered the ruling class another pseudo-scientific "explanation" for the poverty of the working class and of other "races," deemed inherently mentally inferior. The most oppressed layers, considered a burden on the capitalist class and its imperialist ambitions, could be written off and disposed of as an "unfit" underclass.

Like its ideological forerunners, the eugenicist movement found a wide and ready audience in the middle and upper classes hostile to revolutionary socialism—from the nominally "left" reformist Fabian Society to the conservative aristocrat Winston Churchill (whom Johnson constantly seeks to ape.)

Under the influence of these ideas, the Mental Deficiency Act 1913 led to the segregation of up to 65,000 "feeble minded" or "morally defective" people in internal colonies in the UK. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, a Joint Committee on Mental Deficiency reported that there were some 300,000 "mental defectives" in the country and defined the poorest 10 percent of the population as a "social problem group." In 1934, the Departmental Committee on Sterilisation recommended legislation to ensure the "voluntary" sterilisation of "mentally defective women."

Eugenics, like Malthusianism and social Darwinism, was a world movement, justifying tens of thousands of forced sterilisations in the United States and Scandinavia. It reached its fullest and most appalling expression in Nazi Germany, whose concept of "the life unworthy of life" saw the forced sterilisation of 400,000 and murder of 300,000 people considered mentally or physically disabled, and later the mass extermination of Jews, Slavs and Romani people.

In citing Malthus in his article, Johnson is aligning himself with this entire blood-soaked ideological heritage.

The ruling class and the pandemic

The revival by the ruling class of the fascist traditions of its recent past has been carefully analysed by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) for the last six years. In 2014, the German section of the ICFI took up a fight against the relativization of the crimes of the Third Reich being carried out by sections of academia.

In the course of this work, which began in a struggle against the reactionary teachings of Humboldt University Professors Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler, the ICFI uncovered a broader conspiracy in the ruling elite. Baberowski's pronouncements in leading German newspapers that "Hitler was not vicious" were a preparation for the revival of German militarism now being orchestrated in the Bundestag and for the welcoming of the fascistic Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its policies into the heart of government, to facilitate the suppression of left-wing opposition.

The struggle against the rehabilitation of fascism has become a major question on dozens of German university campuses, and massive anti-fascist demonstrations have been held in several cities. The German section of the ICFI has been placed on the extremist watch-list of the German state security services, on behalf of the AfD.

Drawing the lessons from these events, and following the exposure of a eugenics conference (the London Conference on Intelligence) at University College London in January 2018, involving multiple UK academics, the British section of the ICFI began a far-sighted fight against the revival of social Darwinist and eugenicist ideology, especially in connection with former Oxford researcher Noah Carl.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party explained in a series of articles and two public meetings that the recrudescence of these ideas was bound up with an international campaign of right-wing revanchism on university campuses, in response to widening social inequality, a ratcheting up of inter-imperialist tensions and a global resurgence of class struggle. "The return of eugenics and social Darwinism," we wrote, "is the product of immense shifts in social forces and powerful ruling-class interests, which demand an ever-more right-wing intellectual climate."

In February this year, the WSWS noted that modern-day "eugenicists have found an ally in Johnson's viciously elitist, anti-migrant Tory government."

Johnson told the Centre for Policy Studies in 2013, "Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests, it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16 percent of our species have an IQ below 85." The same year, as the Mayor of London who rubbed shoulders with billionaires on a regular basis, Johnson wrote an article for the *Telegraph* arguing that the "super-rich" belong to "three fairly exclusive categories

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of human being." They "tend to be well above average" in "mathematical, scientific or at least logical reasoning."

Speaking at the Centre for Social Justice in 2016, former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith, the architect of the onslaught on welfare provision and an advocate for lifting the retirement age to 75, said social security "entrapped individuals ... and created a growing underclass."

Johnson's key adviser, Dominic Cummings, produced a paper for Education Secretary Michael Gove arguing that since intelligence was mostly genetic, funding a well-rounded education for working class children was pointless. Cummings was responsible for hiring the self-avowed eugenicist Andrew Sabisky as a special adviser to the government in February. Sabisky was a participant, alongside white supremacists and fascists, in the London Conference on Intelligence. Several UK academics and the right-wing columnist Toby Young, who had been nominated to head the government's student oversight body in January 2018, also attended the event.

Later that year, Tory Party Vice Chair for Youth Ben Bradley claimed in a blog post that Britain would soon be "drowning in a vast sea of unemployed wasters," before telling poorer families, "Sorry but how many children you have is a choice; if you can't afford them, stop having them! Vasectomies are free."

The WSWS commented after Sabisky's hiring that in every case this ideology "has come to prominence in the ruling class in response to a sharpening of the class struggle, under conditions of deep capitalist crisis. Its fundamental purpose is as an ideological weapon against Marxism and the socialist movement—insisting on a biological rather than social cause of inequality—and its consequences are the denigration, suppression and racial division of the working class. ... This reactionary filth is the product of a deep-going rot in ruling class politics, which increasingly takes on a fascistic character."

In the last three months, this process, which began deep in the bowels of bourgeois society, has erupted into a world issue confronting millions of people.

To the ruling class represented by Johnson, the pandemic is an inevitable and largely beneficial "Malthusian catastrophe"; a "check" on population which will filter out its "redundant" and "unfit" sections. The continued endangering of the working class and especially its lowest-paid sections and those with health complications, the turning of care homes into killing fields, and the failure to provide for the essential needs of the old and infirm while isolated at home are social crimes rooted in this abhorrent class ideology.

Its consequences have been most glaringly and horrifically exposed in the abandonment of the elderly. Last Friday, the *Guardian* revealed that the government had rejected a plan from Public Health England for a more secure public health lockdown of care homes, and for making the UK's unused Nightingale hospitals available for the quarantining and care of their residents. Their proposal was submitted on April 28, when it was abundantly clear that the sector was being decimated by coronavirus.

The government shrugged its shoulders at the fate of over 400,000 old people because it considers them, in the language of the Third Reich, "empty eaters." Early on in the crisis, *Telegraph* assistant editor and leading business and economics columnist Jeremy Warner wrote, "From an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long-term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents."

All of this has been carried out unopposed by any section of the ruling elite, or its servants in the media, the trade unions and the Labour Party.

The same is underway internationally. In Germany, politicians and media figures, including representatives of the Left Party, championing a return to work, in alliance with neo-Nazi mobs, are spitting on the right to life. US President Donald Trump is carrying out a wholesale reopening of the economy and abandonment of public health measures in alliance with the Democratic Party. Sweden's Social Democratic government and its de facto policy of herd immunity that resulted in one of the highest death rate per capita in the world have been cited repeatedly as the model to emulate.

Coronavirus has exposed a ruling class in a state of terminal decay, which has lost any right to rule and which responds to crises with murderous theories "unearthed from a medieval graveyard," as Trotsky wrote of 1930s fascism. A rational and humane solution to this world catastrophe and its aftermath depends on the progressive force in society, the international working class, fulfilling its revolutionary mission and laying these retrograde social forces to rest in a conscious struggle for socialism.

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