

“The Decadence of Capital”

An Alibi For “Progress”?

Interrogations

1988

FE Note: The essay below explores and criticizes the theory of the “decadence of capitalism,” a view held by several ultra-left sects here and in Europe. This view contends (a la Marx) that capital once had a dynamic phase in which it created the material base for a transition to socialism, but since the advent of World War I in 1914 has entered a decadent phase marked by cycles of war, reconstruction, depression and war again.

This article is a translation of a text written and circulated by the French Interrogations group. Their address is at the end of the essay.

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The decadence of capitalism is a theme which revolutionaries in the past used in seeking to find an explanation for changes occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as a search for appropriate responses to these changes. They believed that if a revolution did not come soon, bourgeois society would head directly toward barbarism. “War or revolution,” socialism or barbarism” were the historical alternatives put forward by all who adopted these theses, whether the theses were central or peripheral to their position.

These theses were based essentially on Rosa Luxemburg’s theoretical work, whose principal virtue probably was to analyze capitalism, not as a rigid structure, but as a dynamic movement engaged in fighting “an exterminating battle everywhere and constantly against the natural economy, in whatever form it finds it, whether the form be slavery, feudalism, primitive communism or a patriarchal peasant economy.” “The time is past when the small and middle farmers lived almost without cash money and could thresh the wheat according to their need for money. At present the farmer always has to have access to money, a great deal of money in order to pay his taxes. Soon he will have to sell all his products so as to buy back from the industrialists what he needs in the form of commodities.” (*Accumulation of Capital*).

Some important corollaries follow from this theory: on the extension of market relations and the mediating role of money in a growing number of human activities; on the increasing intervention of the state in the management of capitalist affairs; on the importance of the war economy and the sector of arms production...The limits of this theory were reached already in the period in which it was formulated and in the very framework of this formulation: social-democracy.

In this sense, one can say that the theory contributed to the partial break with social democracy (the European ultra-left tendencies) while at the same time it contributed to the formulation of ideologies which justified social-democratic policies—both in the name of the decadence of capital!

According to a conception widely held by adherents of the decadence theory, imperialism is relatively recent: it consists of the colonization of the entire world and is the “final stage of capitalism”. We get closer to the truth by turning this conception on its head and saying that imperialism was the first stage of capitalism, that the world was subsequently colonized by the nation-states and the social relations that accompany this colonization.

In defining imperialism as the last stage of capitalism, one infers a break within this colonizing movement, one which is both temporal and spatial. A theory which sees an “imperialist phase” in the development of capital and which proposes “new tasks” justified by the opening of this “new period” serves mainly to vindicate “former” practices. Thus after 1914, certain more or less radical social democratic groups claimed to start again from scratch without making a critique of their own activity within this capitalist organization.

Lead to an Apology for Progress

The myth of the “final stage” gave them a theoretical basis for putting forward a new system of “tasks of the proletariat” following the sacrosanct year of 1914. In this way, the neo-social-democrats could continue to associate themselves with the “glorious past” of the Second International by claiming that the pre-1914 reformism was merely a transitory phase in order to reach the final goal: communism. In actual fact, “communism” conceived of as ideology (cf. the Third International) was only a tool which helped strengthen capitalist relations throughout the course of the 20th century.

Ideologies of decadence are based on a superficial view of the contradictory tendencies in capitalist development. Behind the description of the death-throes of capital, the halt of progress, the putrefaction of society...lies an apology for the development and the socialization of the capitalist mode of production. These ideologies do not make a critique of progress (the development of capitalist relations), but rather they criticize what they consider to thwart progress.

In the end, this view of capitalism is a moralistic one. If one should consider the goal of nascent capitalism to be the nourishment of people, this position can lead to an apology for progress and for the development of productive forces in the 19th century. And since the vicious, decadent capitalism of the 20th century no longer feeds all its subjects and even kills some of them along the way, it becomes important to “make the revolution” in order to reallocate and make some adjustments so as once again to enjoy the benefits of progress and industrialization.

Obviously none of this has anything to do with capitalist reality, or with a perspective of a communist humanity. Capitalism does not produce goods, only various commodities which can be converted into money: objects for consumption, weapons, display, appearances. These “goods” for consumption destroy us, brutally or little by little. Their continued production can be assured only through a competitive system which is constantly growing, growing in extent as well as in intensity. Its geographic expansion was responsible for the development of ever more widespread markets, for the great expeditions of the Renaissance, for colonization.

This expansion had already taken place by 1914, but only geographically, in area, and it provided the basis for Rosa Luxemburg’s catastrophic view, an interpretation which underestimated subsequent possibilities for development. In intensity, the growth of this competitive system led to the progressive disappearance of activities which did not pass through the mediation of money (gift, exchange, domestic production,...) and led to advertising and mass production, to the democratic totalitarianism which grew out of World War II.

The theories of decadence led not only to an incapacity to analyze modern capitalism, but to a fascination for the system itself. Modern capitalism could be simultaneously seen as the antechamber of “communism” and the condition for its appearance; negatively because the halt of capitalist development or the difficulties it encountered would bring about the catastrophic collapse of capital; and positively because technological-scientific progress and the socialization of the means of production introduced by capital would permit planning on a world scale and bring about an end to poverty.

As a matter of fact, it is hardly surprising that the appearance of such conceptions appeared just as neo-social-democratic theory adopted a global perspective and when capitalist social relations were rapidly spreading and intensifying. The failure of any of the reformist workers’ movements to transform itself into a revolutionary movement certainly made more credible ideas according to which communism would be an “objective” (not to say, mechanical) necessity and capitalism’s destiny would be a rapid decline and collapse.

This perspective also provided the small ultra-leftist organizations with a reason for their existence, and later, after 1968, provided a basis for some mechanistic analyses according to which another world war was the only

short-term alternative for capitalism in crisis (as if the world were not actually at war!) or, further, that the workers' struggles in Poland were part of "the dynamic process which leads to revolution".

After all these years, it is easy to ridicule Nostradamus and his prophecies of decadence. But rather than indulging oneself in this complacent response, it would make more sense to try to formulate the actual problem: Where and when have capitalist relations suffered a decline in the 20th century? Every serious examination will show that they have only continued to expand and grow stronger.

Admittedly, capitalism undergoes economic crises, but their inevitable result is capitalism's domination" over a new aspect of human existence. Not one of these crises represents the fatal and ineluctable catastrophe which can destroy the capitalist mode of domination. Capitalism is without doubt a catastrophic system, but for humanity—not for itself.

The vision of "revolutionary catastrophism" draws different conclusions from premises it shares with social-democratic reformism. For the former, the crisis will provide the salutary shock which will awaken the proletariat and lead to the destruction of capitalism; the latter openly seeks to manage it. Thus both "revolutionary" and "reformist" social-democrats palliate the difficulty for new social relations to emerge between human beings.

Ultimately, they do not have much cause to reproach this world, unless it be for their sense of shame for their cowardly acceptance of every condition that was imposed on them. These are veritable men of the economy, and they will have to search in and through the economy for reasons to be scandalized by this world.

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