

The Catastrophe and the Challenge

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The End of Reformism

World capitalism is facing a series of major crises, economic, military, and ecological. They imply the end of the possibilities of the reformist program and the need for a revolutionary program and organization.

At a talk I gave in New York about my new book, one questioner from the floor said that all my talk about crises and revolution sounded like religious talk about armageddon and the end of days. In other words, we should dismiss disasters and crises as myths and legends. However, World War I did happen and so did World War II. Inbetween, the worldwide Great Depression happened, as did the rise of Nazism and of Stalinism. The image of a peaceful and stable world is itself a myth, based on the boom years which followed World War II. Actually this boom was geographically limited to Western Europe, North America, and Japan; there was plenty of poverty, war, and revolutions in the “Third World.” At the time, these years of (limited) prosperity seemed to many to disprove the notion that this was the epoch of imperialism and of capitalist decay. But the boom years ended by the middle of the seventies, and it has been downhill ever since. Now the decayed nature of capitalism expresses itself in a number of crises which are crashing around us. Many now see that the capitalist class is unable to run society. A revolution is needed to create a new society. The main crises are economic, military, and ecological/environmental.

1. A liberal economist, Jeff Faux, asks, “Is This The Big One?” that is, another Great Depression. He concludes, Maybe, but it certainly is going to be bad. Summarizing recent economic disasters, he writes, “We are now staring into the abyss...Tens of millions of Americans [could] be out on the street, with neither a job nor a roof over their heads. Unlikely? Yes, still. Unthinkable? Not anymore...Well short of such a worst case scenario, the country seems headed for major economic damage that will severely test whatever we have left of safety nets...So if this is not The Big One, it is likely to be A Big One — and a long one.” (The Nation, 4/14/08. Pp. 13–14.)

The underlying forces which have created this longterm decline deserve more of an analysis, using the tools of the Marxist critique of economics. For now, I point out that, with the end of the post-World War II boom, there have been ups and downs (as business cycles have continued), but the overall direction has been downward. The U.S., which was the world’s banker after World War II has become an almost bankrupt debtor. Once the industrial powerhouse of the world, the U.S. is increasingly deindustrialized and outsourced. After the Great Depression, the bourgeois state set up a range of regulatory mechanisms to prop up the economy. But over the last thirty years, the capitalists have been undermining their own safeguards, making the system ever more vulnerable to its inherent weaknesses. Now, the capitalists stare into the abyss.

2. U.S. aggression against Iraq grinds on, moving into its sixth year. It is hard to know what the U.S. ruling class will do. To continue the war would be disastrous; the Iraqi people will not be controlled. But to leave would also be disastrous, for the interests of U.S. imperialism. U.S. withdrawal is likely to be followed by a mess of civil wars which will draw other countries (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) into the whirlpool. If a stable regime ever develops, it is likely to be anti-U.S.

It took the U.S. ten years to get out of Vietnam (counting from Johnson's escalation to Nixon's final withdrawal). And Vietnam was peripheral to the empire, both geographically and industrially (it had some tin and tungsten). On the other hand, Iraq is at the center of the empire. Just south of Europe, it is in the middle of the world's main supply of petroleum and natural gas, on which all of industrial capitalism depends. The U.S. and other imperialists cannot allow Iraq to sink into chaos...but have no way to prevent this from happening. No U.S. president — whether McCain, Obama, or Clinton — will be able to deal with this U.S. — created disaster in a graceful manner.

The problems of militarism are more than just the Iraq war. Wars are an inevitable outcome of capitalism and its system of national states. War is an extension of its competition in which each is at war with all. As I write, wars (including civil wars) are happening or threatening to happen in Asia, Africa, and South America. What is most frightening is the spread of nuclear weapons. Humanity got through the Cold War without a nuclear war, but there is no guarantee we will get through the post-Cold War era. More states than ever have nuclear bombs. It was in the name of stopping the spread of such "weapons of mass destruction" that the U.S. state invaded Iraq and now threatens Iran. Of course the U.S. rulers never doubt their own right to have such means of human extermination! In fact, the Bush regime suggested building relatively "small" atom bombs as "bunker busters."

These nuclear devices exist. Sooner or later they will be used — unless the governments are disarmed by their working people.

3. Meanwhile there are the intertwined crises of the physical environment, biological ecology, and the need for energy. Capitalism has a drive to accumulate, to make profits by any means possible, and to grow quantitatively. As a result, species are being exterminated. The natural world is treated as a coal mine. Drinkable water is becoming scarce and may become something for nations to fight over. To repeat, the whole of industrial capitalism is based on the use of gasoline, coal, and natural gas, for transportation, food (artificial fertilizer and pesticides), warmth, and for all the things for which we use plastic. But these are non-renewable resources, sure to run out someday. And they are polluting the air, water, and food supplies. Burned, they produce greenhouse gasses which will cause catastrophic flooding in lowlands and catastrophic droughts elsewhere (even in the U.S. and Europe). This is no way to run a civilization! All of our technology will have to be reorganized to create a healthier world.

The Effects of the Crises

Objectively reformism is dead. While some reforms may yet be won here and there, overall the various versions of reformism cannot begin to solve the problems posed by the crises. Subjectively, more and more people will become aware of the need for a revolutionary program and organization. Each of these crises is an aspect of the fundamental crisis of capitalism. The reality of capitalism's crises is becoming clearer to more workers. As a result, the commonplaces of pro-capitalist politics, of liberalism and conservatism, will become disproven. The middle of conventional politics will fall away. The extremes will grow. One extreme will be that of fascism. Probably this will not appear as overt Nazism but as all-American right-wing Christian theocracy.

This movement aims to overthrow the elected government and replace it with a dictatorship of people who (claim to) speak for God. However they will be very un-godlike types.

The left will also grow. There will be a revival of reform socialism, as well as various forms of Marxism-Leninism, aiming to establish new and better states. Hopefully there will also be anarchists and other libertarian socialists who will organize themselves to spread a revolutionary program.

Let me return to the questioner from my talk. It is true, I responded, that referring to the crises which face us resembles certain religious attitudes. I cited Martin Buber's concept of two types of prophecy. One is the statement of what you believe to be inevitable, God's will, which humans cannot change. An example is the Christian fundamentalist "Left Behind" series of religious novels. Armageddon is supposedly coming, God will win, and individuals only have the freedom to choose to be on God's side or on Satan's side.

The other form of prophecy is a statement of the historic choices before an individual and before a people — and, I would add, before the working class. The outcome is not inevitable. The people are challenged to make a choice, one way or the other. How they (we) chose will determine how — and whether — we will live.

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