

Imperialism and Revolution



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US ascent and political consciousness

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The ascent of the United States from 1776 to 1968 was indeed spectacular. A confederation of thirteen English settler societies in North America, whose economies were based in commercial agriculture, evolved to become the most powerful empire in human history, commanding most of the planet with unprecedented economic and military power and never before imagined capacities in technology and communication. The spectacular ascent of the United States to a position of unprecedented economic and military power is a self-evident and undeniable fact.

If greatness is measured in terms of economic and military power, the United States of America is the greatest nation in human history. This is the foundation to the rise of Trump. Seizing upon the fact that the United States had suffered a productive and commercial decline relative to other advanced economies in recent decades, he promised to make America great again. He delivers on the promise by imposing or threatening tariffs in defense of economic interests, and by engaging in aggressive financial measures against targeted nations that challenge the structures of the neocolonial world-system. He combines this

economic nationalism and counterrevolutionary policies with xenophobic measures and subtly-racist discourses that respond to the concerns and frustrations of the people, of white society for the most part.

To be sure, greatness can be understood in other ways, such as the degree to which a society attends to the needs of the poor or appreciates the arts. But in the context of a political culture that celebrates the economic and military power of the nation, such interpretations have limited political appeal.

The challenge that Trump symbolizes requires us to respond in form that debunks the assumption that America was once great in a form more politically and intellectually forceful than interpretations that appeal only to those with more sensitive dispositions. For this reason, I have begun this program on Imperialism and Revolution with nine programs that have sought to explain the actual economic and historical factors that propelled the U.S. ascent. When we comprehend these factors, it is more difficult for us to move from awareness of the self-evident fact of spectacular ascent to the political interpretation of American greatness, because the actual factors in the U.S. ascent blatantly contradict the democratic values that the nation proclaims, thereby making evident the need for a reformulation of the nation's narrative.

Let us review the six factors that explain the U.S. ascent. First, the possibilities for farmers in the North American colonies and the young U.S. republic to sell food and animal products to slaveholders in the Caribbean, thereby accumulating capital, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Secondly, the conversion of the accumulated capital to factories in the Northeastern region of the United States, which sold manufactured goods to the slaveholders in the U.S. South, thus propelling the expansion of Northern industry, during the nineteenth century. Thirdly, the conquest of the West and of Mexico, a vast territorial expansion that provided a material foundation for continued commercial and industrial expansion. Fourthly, the concentration of U.S. industrial enterprises and banks, enhancing the productive capacity of the economy, a process led by the "Robber Barons," during the second half of the nineteenth century. Fifthly, imperialist policies with respect to Latin America and the Caribbean during the twentieth century, which involved interfering in the affairs of nations in order to obtain access to markets (for surplus manufactured goods), raw materials (necessary for industrial production), and cheap labor. Sixthly, profits from the manufacture and sale of arms during the twentieth century, during World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

Understanding these factors enables us to delegitimize two false interpretations of the U.S. ascent. First, that the U.S. ascent was due to the work-ethic of American culture. It is reasonable to say that there is a high identification with and dedication to work in U.S. culture, but the U.S. work ethic is not an explanatory factor in the ascent, inasmuch as a work ethic could not possibly have facilitated the spectacular U.S. ascent, if the six factors had not been present. Likely, the economic opportunities created by the six factors stimulated the development of a strong work ethic in U.S. society.

Secondly, some conclude that the advanced material level of U.S. society shows that capitalism was and is more efficient than socialism, because socialist societies, at least before the recent ascent of China, are not as advanced economically as the United States and Western European capitalist economies. Understanding the actual factors of the U.S. ascent enables us to see that the socialist nations, which are the historically colonized nations, never had the possibility to conquer vast regions of the planet, like the European colonial powers, nor to insert themselves in an advantageous economic situation in structures created by European colonial domination, as did the United States. In fact, the imposed structures that were promoting the economic development of the West simultaneously were generating the underdevelopment of the colonies. When socialist revolutions triumphed in the colonized zones, they had to begin from the conditions of underdevelopment that were a legacy of colonialism, and they had to confront the aggressive hostility of the ex-colonial powers and U.S. imperialism. Their lower level of economic development is not a consequence of an alleged inefficiency of state management and regulation of the economy, or of any other characteristic of socialism, but of their position in the modern worldwide process of European colonial conquest and domination.

Therefore, we have begun the program on Imperialism and Revolution with the explanation of the historical and economic factors of the U.S. ascent as a useful starting point for the construction of an alternative narrative to that of Trump and similar neofascist tendencies in Europe. We will see in future programs in this series on Imperialism and Revolution that the United States in the midst of a decline relative to other advanced economies in the world-system. The decline could be dated from 1963, with the assassination of John F. Kennedy; from 1965, with the beginning of the U.S. military escalation in Vietnam; from 1968, when the student anti-war and black power movements reached their culminating moment; or from 1971, when the United States took the first measure in removing the dollar from the gold standard. And we will see that the U.S. relative decline coincides with the entrance of the neocolonial world-system into a sustained structural crisis, which is occurring as a result of two factors: first, the fact that the world-system has overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth; and secondly, the fact that the neocolonized peoples are in a permanent condition of rebellion and revolution.

In order to respond to the challenges that Trump and other forms of neofascism represent, we must form social movements in the nations of the North that, among other requisites, have sufficient political consciousness to understand that the U.S. ascent was based on conquest, colonial domination, slavery, and imperialism, in fundamental contradiction with the democratic values that the nation proclaims. And to understand that the declining hegemonic power in a world-system in structural crisis has no reasonable option but to adopt an alternative road of cooperation with other nations, an alternative to imperialism, if the world-system is to find political stability, and if humanity is to avoid chaos. Such a fundamental change in the direction of U.S. foreign policy cannot be accomplished by pressuring the U.S. power elite; it requires the taking of political power by an anti-imperialist popular movement that retakes anti-imperialist manifestations in the history of U.S. popular movements, which expressed themselves in the clearest form in the Revolution of 1968, a popular revolution that arrived to important insights but collapsed amidst its contradictions and errors, a phenomenon that we will examine in our program on Imperialism and Revolution next week.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a world more just, democratic, and sustainable.

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