

Covid-19 exposes the structural crisis of the world-system



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We are in a historic moment defined by a sustained structural crisis of the world-system, whose symptoms began to be expressed in the 1970s; and impacted by the new coronavirus pandemic, which dramatically exposes the incapacity of world-system structures to respond to human needs. Let us look succinctly at the function and evolution of these structures.

The economic structures of the modern world system were established by European conquest and colonial domination of Latin America and the Caribbean in the sixteenth century, and the European conquest, domination, and direct or indirect control of vast regions of South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa from the middle of the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth. In each region, in the aftermath of the European conquest, the economies of the conquered empires, nations, and societies were transformed, converted into suppliers of raw materials for the expanding manufacturing and commerce of the European center. The colonized peoples formed movements in opposition to the imposed system, and they attained political independence; but their sovereignty was

compromised by their having to accept the structures of the world-economy established during the colonial period.

With respect to a world-economy that expands through the conquest of lands and peoples, one could ask, what happens to such an economy when it reaches the geographical limits of the planet? It was a question that even intellectuals did not ask, inasmuch as the world-system was legitimated through an ideology that denied the evident and fundamental relation between conquest and development.

Aside from the denial of fundamentals, the world-system has been plagued by the resistance of the colonized, who never accepted the neocolonial status, and its consequent underdevelopment and poverty, to which they were assigned. In the thirty-year period following World War II, the unacceptability of the neocolonial world order for the colonized was indicated by the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the heroic resistance of Vietnam, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the emergence of the "spirit of Bandung," the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the unified demand for a New International Economic Order.

The emergence of the voice of the neocolonized coincided with the rise of the United States to a position of hegemony. The U.S. power elite, rather than accommodating to the demands of the independence movements of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean and the anti-imperialist demands of Latin America, opted for the militarization of the U.S. economy and society, a permanent war economy, the presence of military bases everywhere, and continuation of imperialist policies that sought to control the natural resources, labor, and markets of the world, with the intention of conserving its hegemony in a system that was in transition to a neocolonial world-system.

In the final analysis, the direction taken by the U.S. power elite in the post-World War II era was not sustainable. The factors that had driven the spectacular U.S. ascent that had begun in the eighteenth century were no longer present. Moreover, a world-system characterized by the profitable exploitation of natural resources, the superexploitation of labor, and the direct or indirect political control by a few global powers was no longer sustainable, because, as noted, the world-system had reached its geographical limits, and because the colonized had developed various forms of rebellion and resistance.

In the 1960s, the resistance of the colonized was joined by a youth rebellion, provoked by the exposure of the imperialist character of the world by the Vietnamese resistance. This was soon followed by an economic crisis of "stagflation" in the 1970s. These dynamics were symptoms of the structural contradictions of the system, but the global elite did not respond with a scientific understanding. Rather, it imposed neoliberal economic policies, which increased short-term profits of the corporations; but it also weakened the limited sovereignty of states, reduced the purchasing power of national markets, increased inequalities, and intensified global conflicts.

The neoliberal economic war against the poor left the Third World in a condition of ideological confusion, and accommodationist politicians and intellectuals emerged. But China, Vietnam, and Cuba persisted in their socialist projects, making adjustments in accordance with their experiences. And beginning in the late 1990s, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean began to retake its classic anti-imperialist agenda, seeking to develop regional political unity and economic integration based on cooperation, solidarity, and mutually beneficial trade. Cuba joined the Latin American initiative, and it led the Non-Aligned Movement, having grown by then to 118 nations, to a retaking of its classic demands for a New International Economic Order. By 2010, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador had declared themselves to be constructing socialism, and they were joined Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay in seeking to build, step-by-step, an alternative world order. In this anti-imperialist project, Latin America and the Caribbean were accompanied by China, Vietnam, Russia, and Iran. And all these nations were supported by the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77. An alternative world-system was seeking to be born, in theory and practice.

Meanwhile, the United States, a declining hegemonic power, increasingly demonstrated its barbarity, using the September 11 terrorist attacks as pretext. It has launched wars of aggression and new forms of imperialist war, seeking to push back the drive of the neocolonized for sovereignty and seeking to attain control of natural resources. In doing so, it has violated fundamental tenets of neocolonial domination, which has to attain its goals with the façade of democracy and not with brute force and obvious lies. This restoration project of the Right has had political victories in the last five or six years, but U.S. imperialist aggression is increasingly evident, thus rendering the nation incapable of leading the world toward a revitalized and stable neocolonial world order.

The decadence of the neocolonial world-system is increasingly evident, and as new forms of fascism emerge, it shows signs of giving way to what Fidel called a global military dictatorship. In this global context, the example of Cuba is important. In both its domestic affairs and its international projections, it points toward an alternative possible and necessary road. Joined with nations such as China, Vietnam, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Iran, it continues to seek to develop a more just, democratic, and sustainable world-system. There has emerged what Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel characterized in 2019 as a Third World War between, on the one hand, imperialist governments and their allies, and on the other hand, governments that seek to protect their sovereignty.

Before Covid-19, therefore, the incapacity of the neocolonial world-system to respond to fundamental human needs was increasingly evident. But now Covid-19 shows in a dramatic form the indifference of the system to human needs. Covid-19 demonstrates the inhumanity of a world-system that pretends to promote democratic values but in fact is organized to protect wealth and power.

In a world-system of interrelated nation-states, in order for human needs to be addressed in a systematic form, two conditions must be met. First, states must be under the control of the delegates of the people; and second, states must have sovereignty. In the world-system as it is presently organized, not only do such conditions tend not to exist, but when the people seek to establish them, they are attacked by the global powers. This situation leaves the peoples of the world vulnerable to pandemics and other calamities.

When one studies Cuban history, one finds that in the period between 1933 and 1953, there was much confusion and division among the people, inasmuch as the republic envisioned by Martí appeared unattainable. A spirit of hope was kept alive, but it lacked coherence and unified political expression. But the attack on Moncada Barracks of July 26, 1953 galvanized the people, and the dramatic event was explained by History Will Absolve Me, which was at once a manifesto and a platform.

The Covid-19 pandemic is an impacting event that could be the Moncada of our time, if the Left has the political intelligence to seize the moment and to explain to the peoples the structural sources of the problems confronting humanity and the necessary alternative road.

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