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By Charles McKelvey

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In an article in the Wall Street Journal on April 3, Henry Kissinger asserts that “The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order,” and that the United States must plan for a new epoch. In truth Kissinger does not envision a new epoch, but repair of a damaged global political-economic system. He envisions the multilateral cooperation of the imperialist powers in the restoration of the neocolonial world-system. As always, he does not see that the world-system as it is presently structured is not sustainable, because it has overreached the geographical and ecological limits of the planet, and because the neocolonized peoples do not accept its unjust terms.

Kissinger is right in lamenting the U.S. loss of national unity and purpose that it possessed when confronting the threat of Nazi-fascism; and he is right in noting that the peoples of many of the leading nations of the world no longer have faith in the principal political and social institutions. But he does not

discern that the loss of national purpose and faith in national institutions have deep historic roots. The division and loss of faith are made fully visible by the coronavirus pandemic, but they have not been caused by this recent phenomenon. Moreover, Kissinger calls for cooperation among states in preparing for the next pandemic, without discerning that such cooperation is blocked by the liberal order that he wishes to preserve. And he wants to heal the wounds of the world-economy, unaware that the world-economy is not merely wounded, but constructed on an unsustainable foundation.

Kissinger wants to “safeguard the principles of the liberal world order,” and he calls for “the world’s democracies to defend and sustain Enlightenment values.” He thus does not escape that cultural blindness that pervades Western “democracies,” where structures that are legitimated by words like freedom and human rights enable the power elite to control and manipulate the political process and public debate, and they ensure that corporations own the media of communication and finance the system of higher education.

Because politics and ideology are in the hands of the elite, we the people are prevented from seeing that the modern world-economy is based in a colonial foundation. We do not fully understand that the world-economy depends on corporate access to the superexploited labor and natural resources of the planet, and it therefore cannot respect the true sovereignty of nations. We thus are blind to the structural transformations that are necessary to make possible respect for the full dignity of the human being.

The extreme Right and the ultra-Left are not completely off the mark in claiming that the effects of the coronavirus pandemic are exaggerated, in that pandemics have become the global norm, tolerated by the powerful. Before Covid-19, how many people in the world were dying from diseases that could have been treated had they had access to health care? How many were dying from the lack of fundamental human necessities? Before Covid-19, we had the pandemic of poverty, but we did not notice or care. Now that, for whatever reasons, the world is focused on the number of people killed by the new coronavirus, the incapacity of the system to protect human life is made evident for all to see, thus implying a need, at the very least, for a change in priorities.

Henry Kissinger was in a position of power precisely at a time in human history when the world needed persons with a different mentality in the halls of power. In that era, the colonized and neocolonized peoples of the earth were arriving to a presence in global affairs, presenting to the world a unified demand for the construction of what they called a “New International Economic Order,” one not based on domination and superexploitation but on cooperation and mutually beneficial trade among nations. Meanwhile, the youth of the Western nations were in the streets, dreaming of an end to racism, poverty, and war; proclaiming “power to the people;” and believing that humanity stood at the dawn of the “age of Aquarius.”

Those voices reflected the coming of age of social movements that partially discerned the fundamental injustices of the world system. They were not heard by those in the centers of power, who seemed unwilling to seek to understand the historical and structural sources of the new voices from below. Nor did they understand the concurrent stagnation in profits, which was rooted in the fact that the world-system, which since the sixteenth century had economically expanded by conquering new lands and peoples, had reached the geographical limits of the earth. Those in power responded to these unanticipated and threatening economic, social, and political developments with a turn to the Right, weakening the limited power of states to regulate industries, commerce, finances, and currencies; and to protect the human needs of their peoples. These measures gave the elite short-term profits, but they only intensified the symptoms of a world-system moving toward chaos, and they left the peoples in an even more vulnerable position. As the world situation continued to deteriorate, the increasingly conservative power elite turned to wars of aggression in pursuit of control of natural resources, in violation of the fundamental civilizational rules established by the system in the period 1945 to 1960, when it enjoyed a moment of relative stability under U.S. hegemony.

The global turn to the Right in 1980 was based on untenable assumptions with respect to the role of the state in relation to the economy and society. And it dismissed the demands of the neocolonized peoples for true sovereignty. The neoliberal turn only intensified opposition to the established structures of the world-system, taking one form in the Middle East and another in Latin America, which in turn provoked new and more aggressive forms of imperialism by the global powers. The turn to the Right elevated profits in the short-term, but it undermined the legitimacy of the global elite in the eyes of the peoples of the world. Decades of neoliberalism and wars of aggression have demonstrated the moral and intellectual unpreparedness of those who rule the world. The uncontrollable pandemic only makes clearer their incapacities and their profound indifference to the human needs of the majority.

Now is the time for the progressive forces in each nation of the world to seize the moment and to lead their peoples to that necessary progressive turn that should have been taken in the 1970s. The peoples of the North do not need to construct a new direction from a vacuum. For the past 100 years and more, the peoples of the South have been seeking to transform unjust global social structures. All we need do is awaken, seeing what nations like China, Vietnam, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Iran are envisioning and doing in practice, and cooperate with them in building, step-by-step, a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

With the global elite discredited, an alternative, more just world order is in the hands of the peoples to build.

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