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## Notes on *America in Decline*

### 1. The lack of theory *re* imperialist crisis

Yet comprehension of the laws & mechanisms of imperialist crisis, of the historical momentum behind the current crisis, & where it is heading have seriously lagged. Indeed, such an analysis has been most conspicuous by its absence. It is to this task that *America in Decline* is addressed. This work examines the forces shaping U.S. imperialism, the reasons for its enormous strength in the postwar period, the causes of its decline, & the historic significance of the developing international situation. (*AID*, p. 13)

I agree very strongly with this statement. The necessity *still remains* to carry through on its thrust. Now, however, it must be added that such a work must also examine the forces shaping S.U. imperialism & *its unraveling*. Furthermore, the leap in the forging of a single world economy must also be examined.

### 2. Tendency towards a "straight-line down" view?

These nearly four decades of United States dominance are now turning into their explosive opposite. Listen to the somber prediction made by the Middle East chief of a major U.S. bank: "It was easy in the pre-Vietnam days to look at an area on the map & say, 'that's ours' & feel pretty good about investing there. That's no longer the case, as Iran has made so terribly clear. American investment overseas is going to happen at a reduced rate until we can redefine our world..." (*AID*, p. 14)

The RCP has criticized the Comintern for its "general crisis" view of the period following WW I & the "straight-line down" or "revolution is just around the corner" view that was rampant among activists of the 60's, including the membership & leadership of the RCP. The lack of a comment following the above passage may well be a symptom of an incomplete criticism. Imperialism *has* been able to "redefine our world" & "American investment overseas" has increased markedly since *AID* was written.

### 3. The necessity of World War in the imperialist era

The imperialists are readying to hurl entire continents at one another. The brutal yet inescapable fact is that world war not only looms on the horizon, but is an integral & necessary feature of capitalism in the imperialist epoch. (*AID*, p. 14)

Events following 1989 have certainly proved otherwise, certainly temporarily, but also perhaps permanently. Is it true that "world war...is an integral & necessary feature of capitalism in the imperialist epoch"?

My own musings have been on the issue of the freedom v. necessity confronting the borgs. A provocative way of presenting my musings is to ask the question, "Is it conceivable for California to nuke New York?" From this question, we would go to the question, "Is it conceivable for the U.S. to nuke Europe or Japan?" The question has to do with the constraints on the borgs—its not exactly like they are free to go after each other quite like Bugs Moran & Al Capone under all circumstances.

My point in posing these questions is that (1) There is an inherent tendency for capitalism to reach the stage of imperialism. (2) There is an inherent tendency in the imperialist stage for the world be driven to a single, completely integrated economy; *i.e.*, a single world economy is the attractor state of the world, whose economic process is governed by the fundamental contradiction of class society. By this I mean that economic reproduction of society increasingly tends to take place as a single world process, the longer imperialism exists & expands.

The analogy I have in mind is that of the eukaryotic cell whose discernible units (nucleus, mitochondria, cilia, etc.) were once separate entities that reproduced apart from each other. When they entered into the union that is the eukaryotic cell, they each became disarticulated & dominated by a single reproductive process governed mainly by the nucleus.

If I am correct about this trend in the imperialist world, then this necessity of imperialism to move towards a single world means that certain freedoms are not available to it. At present, we are in a phase where there has been a major leap in this integration, a leap that has been called "globalization", which is somewhat appropriate. In fact, the world has been on a spiral of "globalization" for at least as far back as Columbus. Nonetheless, it is important not to argue about how new "globalization" is but to note that it has in fact taken a big turn with the defeat of the Soviet Union & its dismantling.

Prior to this major event, the world was relatively well separated into two blocs that reproduced independently of each other (more or less). In this situation, nuclear war was quite conceivable. In a highly integrated world that reproduces as a single whole, is such a war conceivable? I do not think that a simple "yes or no" is a way to approach this question, no more than a simple "yes or no" is adequate to the question of California nuking New York (or vice versa). There are degrees of likelihood involved.

The essential point that I am getting at should, however, be fairly apparent. California nuking New York seems rather ludicrous because there is an internal economic cohesion that makes such an act self-defeating. The domestic U.S. has such a high level of integration that it is very costly for one section to turn on another section. Each region of the U.S. needs the others, almost to the point of it being inconceivable for any one region to become economically unproductive & the U.S. surviving as a viable economic entity without one region. The borgs are *not* based in CA or NY but in the U.S.

The world has not yet reached this level of integration. Presently, there is a tendency, even within the formation of a single world economy, for blocs to form (U.S. — S. & C. America, Japan—S.E. Asia, Germany—the European Union & Russia) that have some degree of autonomous reproduction though not complete autonomy. Consequently, in

the near future, I think global war is quite possible, though it has gotten far more risky, given the higher level of integration of the imperialist world since the Reagan era. The competition between imperialist powers increasingly remain confined to the usual run of direct economic competition spiced with military competition over the more peripheral parts of the single world process. Thus they contend over & in the Balkans or try to screw each other over Iraq or Somalia.

Clearly, this is a very rough speculation which needs to be thought over very carefully. However, I find it intriguing & worthy of much thought & study. I am anxious to return to political economy, to understand the question of freedom & necessity more thoroughly.

#### 4. Deterioration/crisis conditions

As this preface is being written, it is possible to look back on a brief two years in which the pace of events in the "deteriorating" international arena noticeably quickened: near economic collapses in Mexico & Poland; insurgencies in Central America; wars in the South Atlantic, Africa, the Persian Gulf, & the Middle East; & massive weapons systems buildups on land, at sea, & in space by both imperialist blocs. In the Third World, the combined effects of world economic crisis & political conflict have resulted in vast migrations of humanity—out of Haiti, Nigeria, the Horn of Africa, South-east Asia...the list goes on. In the seven major imperialist countries of the U.S.-led bloc, twenty-two million are officially unemployed, while in the "wealthiest" country itself fifty percent of Black youth cannot find work. (*AID*, p. 15)

A passage such as this one contains much truth & must not be ignored. However, it is of importance to note that since it was written, the world has gone through more intense paroxysms—Mexico has gone through two drastic peso devaluations following NAFTA, Bolivia has had two general strikes in the first 4 months of 1998, the meltdown in Asia is ongoing—the Japanese banking crisis is not over, the Korean economy is on the ropes, Indonesia has had massive bankruptcies, devaluation of the rupiah & urban rebellions in a number of cities, Burma has imposed further clampdowns on dissidents, etc.

My point is that while the conditions of the masses has worsened considerably & the borgs have taken powerful hits since Raymond wrote this passage, revolution is still not on the agenda in much of the world. We must understand this phenomenon of very bad conditions in the lives of the masses & yet the borgs still having maneuvering room. A bad way of posing the question is "How bad must things get for the masses?" There is no absolute level of "bad" that must be reached before a revolutionary mood is reached. I believe that what affects the mood has a great deal to do with the assessment of the masses of how much control the borgs have & how well they can "deliver" on the necessities of life or how well they can "prove" that they have the ability to deal with crises, even natural disasters.

Closely related to this general question is that of what happened in Peru. Why has the PCP apparently folded? It is not simply the matter of Fujimori's successful roundup of the CC & Gonzalo. I suspect that the control of the situation; *e.g.* the ability of the borgs to handle

the hostage-taking at the Japanese embassy, as well as economic props given to Peru were central. In addition, the lack of PCP leadership needs to be examined.

## 5. Comparison with borg economics

Against this backdrop, the bankruptcy & inanity of mainstream economics stand out the more. In a survey of the difficulties wracking the economies of the Western countries during the 1970s, the London-based financial journal, *The Economist*, examined the track record of contemporary bourgeois economic theory: "It has been a bad decade for economics."<sup>1</sup> Indeed it was. Forecasters were habitually off in their predictions, public officials reversed themselves on policy prescriptions, & research institutes found themselves grasping at straws. When it came to explaining the 1974-1975 global downturn, a watershed in post-World War 2 economic history, the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (which acts to coordinate economic policy among the Western powers) produced this authoritative observation: "the most important feature was an unusual bunching of unfortunate disturbances unlikely to be repeated on the same scale, the impact of which was compounded by some avoidable errors in economic policy." (*AID*, p. 15)

I think that Raymond is correct to raise this. Furthermore, there are those who trash the RCP for its inadequate analysis but fail to grasp that nobody else has really done any better & probably have done far worse. Certainly, this is true of the borgs, who have given up any pretense of having any theory at all—at least when they are talking among themselves & are not focused on conning us.

One particular place where this remark is applicable is in the analysis of the economy in Soviet Union prior to its collapse. It is true that *AID* & the RCP seemed to have relied principally on the CIA reports which were far off the mark in presenting a correct picture of the situation. However, it also seems to me that "hard" information about the status of the Soviet economy at that time was nigh on impossible to get, to the best of my knowledge.

Much of the criticism of *AID* that I have heard have one absolutely *glaring* omission—details of empirical facts are criticized but there is no criticism of its theoretical underpinnings. Abbott's criticism tries to get at a certain aspect of theory, namely, the question of economic determinism, but I think his critique of this question distorts Marxism very badly—it came as no surprise when I saw in his 2nd edition that he had become a Habermasian. This is a general problem of borg economics:

"The problem could be likened to the practice of alchemy—some highly complex & developed procedures & methods, but lacking any scientific foundation...[T]he class position & interest of those who seek to rationalize & defend a rotting system make it impossible for them to grasp the world as it is, & as it is developing." (*AID*, p. 16)

Having said all of this, I nonetheless feel that the most important aspect of where communists world-wide—Maoists, in particular—have gone off is precisely on this question of theory. I pick on the

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<sup>1</sup>*The Economist*, 29 December 1979 - 4 January 1980, p. 41.

Maoists because they are, in my opinion, the only ones who have a fighting chance of recovering from this error. None of the other trends have a snowball's chance in hell of getting to a scientific foundation for assessing the road forward.

#### 6. Doomsday thinking of one borg section

To be sure, the scholars & experts have not all been Pollyannish. Running counterpoint to the anti-septic micro- & macro- theories of capitalist rationality & adaptability has been a kind of doomsday thinking, which found an early & celebrated expression in the Club of Rome's 1972 *The Limits to Growth*. This was a modern Malthusianism: predictions of a cataclysmic collapse of the world economy due to overpopulation & resource exhaustion. There has also been a revival of "long-wave" theory, which postulates a prolonged slowdown. If the learned hands do not know exactly what should be done, they do know the capitalist system is pushing against certain limits—even as they seek to theoretically explain this with a conjurer's trickery. (*AID*, p. 16)

There are several important, popularly written, books of this persuasion:

- David Kennedy, *The Rise & Fall of Great Powers*,
- Walter Russell Mead, *Mortal Splendor*,
- William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not*.

#### 7. The Heritage of *AID*, The Cultural Revolution

*America in Decline* owes its existence to a renaissance of Marxist theory stimulated by the revolutionary upsurges of the 1960s. Many activists, inspired by the national liberation struggles in the Third World & the Cultural Revolution in China, turned to Marxism, both to develop a systematic understanding of what was happening in the world & to establish the theoretical line of sight of the struggle to transform it. The Cultural Revolution embodied a living critique & produced a body of ideas which challenged what had come to be regarded as socialism & socialist theory, namely the Soviet Union & a "Marxism" which, in method & outlook, had been effectively gutted of rebellion & revolution. In their polemics with the Soviets, Mao & the Chinese revolutionaries defended the principles of armed struggle & the dictatorship of the proletariat. They undertook the formidable task of making an analysis of the dynamics of classes & class struggle in socialist society, & they generated a politics—the theory of continuing revolution—& a political economy of the socialist transition period. But while the Chinese revolutionaries posited an assessment of the international situation in the early 1970s, based on the likely outbreak of interimperialist world war unless prevented by revolution, they did not develop a comprehensive analysis of the political economy of imperialism in the postwar period. (*AID*, p. 16 - 17)

#### 8. The Foundation of *AID*, Lenin's *Imperialism*

The foundation for such an analysis had been laid several decades earlier in Lenin's *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which represented the major breakthrough in Marxist political economy since *Capital*. Not only did it systematize an understanding of the major developments in the capitalist mode of production since Marx wrote his masterwork, but it provided the framework for a revolutionary internationalist politics in the imperialist era. However, as Lenin himself reminded his readers, this was only an outline. Unfortunately, the theoretical work begun by Lenin was not carried forward by the international communist movement. In fact, in the formulations of "general crisis"

associated with the Comintern, which continue to exert a deleterious influence on Marxist political economy, Marx & Lenin's methodology was largely abandoned. Given an impoverished tradition which, in effect, served as an immunization against reality & could only counsel faith in the "coming collapse," it was not surprising that various noncommunist schools of Marxist economic thought developed & to some degree flourished during different phases of the postwar period. (*AID*, p. 17)

What the RCP has accused the Comintern of doing may be what it itself has been somewhat guilty of.

#### 9. A brief remark on post- WW II Neo-Marxism

In coming to grips with the dynamics of imperialism since the end of World War 2, it has been necessary on our part to settle accounts with these schools. Neo-Marxists subjected the basic laws of accumulation discovered by Marx to major criticism. Many brands of "Third Worldist" thought (which in fact incorporated central tenets of neo-Marxism) saw in the very sharp contradictions between the metropolises & the oppressed periphery the basic motor of capitalist accumulation which could run almost endlessly. & particularly as the inadequacies of these other conceptions became more manifest, there were those who argued for a "return to *Capital*," mainly restricting themselves to exegetical glosses or "proofs" of Marx's theorems. Each school has in a fashion attempted to tackle the real problems of analysis posed by world developments, but none has been capable of grasping the dialectics of imperialism & proletarian revolution in any thoroughgoing & scientific way. The neo-Marxists focused on a single aspect of the postwar period, the sustained boom, without grasping its contradictory coordinates. While the "Third Worldists" correctly laid great stress on the role of the colonies in the process of imperialist accumulation, they raised one aspect of imperialism to the basic exclusion of all others. While correctly insisting upon Marxist rigor, many of those advocating a return to the categories of *Capital* functionally denied the specificity of imperialism. None of these approaches could explain the complexity & direction of world events, much less support a revolutionary & internationalist politics. (*AID*, p. 17 - 18)

The RCP itself, subjected Marx & Lenin to major criticism in the realm of philosophy & thereby reduce much of *Capital* to the level of some kind of great intuitive leap. This occurs through the denial of the negation of the negation as a law of dialectics, a coarse understanding of the law of the transition of quantity into quality, the relation between what is physically external to an object & what is physically internal to it, thereby distorting the labor theory of value & the underpinning of the Marxist theory of knowledge, & through all of such contortions, the kernel of dialectics itself. I suspect an important one-sidedness in *AID* on these grounds alone.

#### 10. The Single World Process as a Starting Point (Ansatz)

A conceptual starting point of this work is that the world economy must be treated as an integral whole. In a word, if we want to understand why there is starvation in the Sahel, why there are modern skyscrapers in São Paulo, why there is youth rebellion in the West or a momentary ebbing of revolutionary struggles in the 1970s, & why imperialism is headed toward world war, we must look first to the international environment of capitalism. One crucial feature of that environment is the existence of an imperialist power which arose out of the reversal of socialism & which still makes use of many of the forms & structures developed under socialism—that is, Soviet social-imperialism. We refer to the Soviet Union—and to its bloc—as social-imperialist because of its history as a socialist state & the peculiar ideological camouflage of its depredations. While the purpose of this work is not to analyze that particularity & its historical underpinnings as such, the basic laws which we analyze

apply to both imperialist blocs, & a full presentation of their significance & operation is impossible without reference to the social-imperialist formations. (*AID*, p. 18)

This is a solid starting point, as events throughout the past two decades have shown. Furthermore, in my opinion, its broad outlines could have been predicted, based even on *Capital* alone, much less on it & *Imperialism*. What else does the tendency of capital to expand without limit mean if not this? Hell, if the universe is as full of planets as it seems to be (best guesses of the astronomers as of 1998:30 - 50% of all stars have planets) then the survival of capitalism into the the next few millenia might mean the formation of the *Federation* as a single galactic process.

#### 11. Claim of upholding Marx, Lenin & Mao

Much of the preparation of *America in Decline* involved close textual study of Marx in light of Lenin's work on imperialism, & of Lenin in light of major international developments since he elaborated his analysis. The continued development of imperialism & the accumulation of vast new experience (including that of socialist revolution) require & make possible further systematization, both of the particularities of the postwar period & of the inner driving forces of imperialism as a stage of world history. But this can only be undertaken by building on the conclusions of Marx & Lenin, & on the basis of their methodology & outlook. In this context, Mao's important philosophical contribution on dialectics & on the relationship between the objective & subjective factors & the conscious dynamic role of man becomes most relevant: the purpose of making such an analysis is to accelerate the trend of history. (*AID*, p. 18)

There is the easy assumption that Marx, Lenin & Mao all fundamentally agree on their methodology & outlook. In the main, this is not a difficult thesis to defend, but the philosophical differences between Mao & Marx loom large in my analysis so this statement is much too facile. One thing that needs to be upheld here is the following: "Mao's important philosophical contribution...on the relationship between the objective & subjective factors & the conscious dynamic role of man becomes most relevant: the purpose of making such an analysis is to accelerate the trend of history." I have serious disagreements with the part of the statement, "Mao's important philosophical contribution on dialectics..." Could this be one of the problems underlying the ways that *AID* strays from the mark?

#### 12. A Cardinal Political Conclusion of *AID*—Proletarian Internationalism

This work is no mere academic exercise. If it can be said to be making up for lost time, it is only because we are in a race against time. We are approaching one of those brief but decisive periods of exceptional historical & social tension, when the routines of normal life are shattered, when the possibilities for revolution are heightened. This has particular significance in a country like the United States which has been responsible for the suffering & deaths of hundreds of millions throughout the world. The very bulwark of imperialism in the postwar period will soon be plunged into great disorder. At the same time, revolutionary struggles in all parts of the world will bear tremendously on the situation & course of events in the U.S., & it is the inevitable conclusion of our analysis that maximizing revolutionary gains for the international proletariat as a whole must be the fundamental point of departure in all countries—a basic truth which takes on magnified significance in such decisive periods. What is attempted & accomplished—& here we speak of revolutionary initiatives—will reverberate powerfully through the future of human history. (*AID*, p. 19)