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The Rising Tide of Barbarism. Prospects for Socialism

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Introduction

Western societies and states are moving inexorably toward conditions resembling barbarism; structural changes are reversing decades of social welfare and subjecting labor, natural resources and the wealth of nations to raw exploitation, pillage and plunder, driving living standards downward and provoking unprecedented levels of discontent.

We will proceed by outlining the economic political and military processes driving this process of decay and decomposition and follow with an account of the mass popular responses to their own deteriorating conditions. The deep structural changes accompanying the rise of barbarism become the basis for considering the prospects for socialism in the 21st century.

The Rising Tide of Barbarism

In ancient society 'barbarism' and its carriers 'the barbarians' were envisioned as threats by outside invaders from outlying regions descending on Rome or Athens. In contemporary Western societies, the barbarians came from within, among the elite of society, intent on imposing a new order which destroys the social fabric and productive base of society, converting stable livelihoods into insecure deteriorating conditions of daily life.

The key to contemporary barbarism is found in the deep structures of the imperial state and economy. These include:

The ascendancy of a financial-speculative elite which has pillaged trillions of dollars from savers, investors, mortgage carriers, consumers and the state, siphoning enormous resources from the productive economy into the hands of a parasitic elite embedded in the state and paper economy.

The militaristic political elite overseeing a state of permanent warfare since the middle of the last century. Endless wars, cross border assassinations, state terror and the suspension of traditional constitutional guarantees have led to the concentration of dictatorial powers, arbitrary jailing, torture and the denial of habeas corpus.

In the midst of a deep economic recession and stagnation, high levels of state spending on economic and military empire building at the expense of the domestic economy and living standards, reflects the subordination of the local economy to the activities of the imperial state.

Corruption at the top in all aspects of state and business activity – from state procurement to privatization to subsidies for the super-rich – encourages the growth of international crime from top to bottom, the lumpenization of the capitalist class and a state where law and order have fallen into disrepute.

As a result of the high costs of empire building and the pillage by the financial oligarchy, the socio-economic burden has been placed directly on the shoulders of wage and salaried workers, pensioners and the self-employed resulting in long-term, large-scale downward mobility. With job losses and the disappearance of well paying jobs, home foreclosures skyrocket and the stable middle and working classes shrink and are forced to extend their hours of labor and years of work.

As imperial wars spread across the world targeting entire populations, via sustained bombings and clandestine terror operations, they generate opposing terrorist networks, which also target civilians in markets, transport and public spaces. The world resembles a Hobbesian world of ‘all against all’.

Rising ethno-religious extremism linked to militarism is found among Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, replacing international class solidarity with doctrines of racial supremacy and penetrating the deep structures of states and societies.

The demise of European and Asian welfare collectivism – in the ex USSR and China – has lifted the competitive pressures on Western capitalism and encouraged them to revoke all the welfare concessions conceded to labor in the post World War II period.

The demise of “Communism” and the integration of social democracy into the capitalist system have led to a severe weakening of the Left, which the sporadic protests of the social movements have failed to replace.

In the face of the current large scale assault on workers’ and middle class’ living standards, there are only sporadic protests at best and political impotence at worst.

Massive exploitation of labor in post-revolutionary capitalist societies, like China and Vietnam, includes the exclusion of hundreds of millions of migrant workers from elementary public educational and health services. The unprecedented pillage and seizure by domestic oligarchs and foreign multinationals of thousands of lucrative strategic public enterprises in Russia, the ex-Soviet republics, Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Baltic countries was the greatest transfer of public to private wealth in the shortest time in all of history.

In summary, ‘barbarism’ has emerged as a defining reality, product of the ascendancy of a militarist and parasitic financial ruling class. The barbarians are here and now, present within the frontiers of Western societies and states. They are dominant and aggressively pursuing an agenda which is continually reducing living standards, transferring public wealth to their private coffers, pillaging public resources, savaging constitutional rights in their pursuit of imperial wars, segregating and persecuting millions of immigrant workers and promoting the disintegration and diminution of the stable working and middle class. More than at any time in recent history, the top 1% of the population controls an increasing share of national wealth and income.

Myths and Realities of Historical Capitalism

The sustained, large scale roll back of social rights and welfare provisions, wages, job security, pensions and salaries demonstrates the falsity of the idea of the linear progress of capitalism. The reversal, product of the heightened power of the capitalist class, demonstrates the validity of the Marxist proposition that class struggle is the motor force of history – at least, in so far, as the human condition is considered the centerpiece of history.

The second false assumption is that states based on ‘market economies’ require peace and the corollary that ‘markets’ trump militarism, is disproven by the fact that the premier market economy, the United States has been in a constant state of war since the early 1940’s, actively engaged in wars on four continents, to the present day, with new bigger and bloodier wars on the horizon. The cause and consequence of permanent warfare, is the growth of a monstrous ‘national security state’ which recognizes no national borders and absorbs the greater part of the national budget.

The third myth of ‘advanced’ mature capitalism is that it constantly revolutionizes production through innovation and technology. With the rise of the militarist – financial speculative elite, productive forces have been pillaged and ‘innovation’ is largely in the

elaboration of financial instruments which exploit investors, strip assets and wipe out productive employment.

As the empire grows, the domestic economy diminishes, power is centralized in the executive, legislative powers are diminished and the citizenry is denied effective representation or even a veto via electoral processes.

Mass Responses to Rise of Barbarism

The rise of barbarism in our midst has provoked public revulsion against its principal practitioners. Surveys have repeatedly found

- (1) Profound disgust and revulsion against all political parties.
- (2) Huge majorities harbor profound distrust of the corporate and political elite.
- (3) Majorities reject the concentration of corporate power and the abuse of that power, especially among bankers and financiers.
- (4) There is widespread questioning of the democratic credentials of political leaders who act at the behest of the corporate elite and promote the repressive policies of the national security state.
- (5) A large majority rejects the pillage of the state treasury to bail out banks and financial elite, while imposing regressive austerity programs on the working and middle class.

Prospects for Socialism

The capitalist offensive has certainly had a major impact on the objective and subjective conditions of the working and middle classes, increasing impoverishment and provoking a rising tide of personal discontent but not yet massive anti-capitalist movements or even dynamic organized resistance.

Major structural changes require a coming-to-terms with the current adverse circumstances and the identification of new agencies and modes of class struggle and transformation.

One key problem is the need to recreate a productive economy and to reconstruct a new industrial working class in the face of years of financial plunder and de-industrialization, not necessarily the 'dirty' industries of the past, but certainly new industries using and inventing clean energy sources.

Secondly, the highly indebted capitalist societies require a fundamental shift from high-cost militarism and empire building toward a kind of class-based austerity that impose sacrifice and structural reforms on the banking, financial and big retail commercial sectors, substituting local production for cheap consumer imports.

Thirdly, downsizing the financial and retail sector requires the upgrading of skills of the displaced workers and employees as well as shifts in the IT sector to accommodate the shifts in the economy. Paradigmatic shifts from the money wage to the social wage, in which free public education to the highest levels and universal health care and comprehensive pensions replace debt-financed consumerism. This can become the basis for strengthening class consciousness against individual consumerism.

The question is how do we move from weakened, fragmented labor and social movements in retreat or on the defensive, to a position capable of launching an anti-capitalist offensive?

Several subjective and objective factors are possibly working in this direction. First, there is the growing negativity of vast majorities to political incumbents and, in particular, to the financial and economic elites who are clearly identified as responsible for the decline in living standards. Secondly, there is the popular view, shared by millions, that the current austerity programs are clearly unjust – having the workers pay for the crises that the capitalist class brought forth. As yet these majorities are more “anti” status quo than “pro” transformation. The transition from private discontent to collective action is an open question as to who and how, but the opportunity exists.

Several objective factors could trigger a qualitative shift from passive angry discontent to a massive anti-capitalist movement. A “double dip” recession, the end of the present anemic recovery and the onset of a more profound and prolonged recession/depression, could further discredit current rulers and their economic backers.

Secondly, a period of unending and deepening austerity could discredit the current ruling class notion of “necessary pain for future gain” and open minds and move bodies to seek political solutions to achieve current gains by inflicting pain on the economic elites.

Unending and unwinnable imperial wars that bleed the economy, and working class could ultimately create a consciousness that the ruling class has “sacrificed the nation” for ‘no useful purpose’.

Likely, the combination of a new phase of the recession, perpetual austerity and mindless imperial wars can turn the current mass malaise and diffuse hostility against the economic and political elite toward socialist movements, parties and trade unions.