

Imperialism and Revolution



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Lesson #1

Introduction to the Program

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Since the agricultural revolution, which occurred in different regions of the world some ten to twenty thousand years ago, the conquest of territory has been the foundation of empires and the great advances in human civilizations. Empires and civilizations emerged throughout the world in the ancient and feudal eras; in China and Southeast Asia, in the Indus Valley, in the Fertile Crescent, in Africa, and in America. Cities and international commerce came into being, and there were great achievements in production, science, technology, literature, art, and music.

In observing this historic phenomenon, we can see that conquest is the foundation of civilization; or in other words, domination is the foundation of development. This historical reality is often obscured by academic historians, who have an interest in concealing the military and political sources of their relative privilege. In order to emphasize this ideologically invisible historic dynamic, I have coined the phrase “the dialectic of domination and development,” which expresses that domination is the foundation for development, and that

development makes possible further domination. The dialectic of domination and development has been central to the human story since the agricultural revolution.

With the modern era, human advances in technology brought the dialectical relation between domination and development to a more advanced stage, culminating in the development of a single modern world-system, integrating the various regions of the planet. The precursor to this process was the political centralization of nation-states in Western Europe, previously an area that had not been advanced, which provided them with the capacity to conquer vast regions. Important moments or historic stages in the development of the modern world-system included the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century; and the English and French conquest of Asia and Africa from the period 1750 to 1914. If we observe this phenomenon with anything approaching the scientific principle of empirical observation, we can discern that, from 1492 to 1914, seven European nations conquered the empires, kingdoms, societies, and peoples of the planet. The 500-year global conquest enabled the colonial powers to take control of political structures and processes, giving them virtually unlimited access to the natural resources and raw materials of the conquered territories and to the forced labor of the conquered peoples, and it enabled their access to new markets for their surplus manufacturing and agricultural goods.

During the twentieth century, the USA became the dominant power in what had become a neocolonial world-system. In the neocolonial situation, new political structures and ideologies functioned to obscure the colonial foundation of the world-system, by granting to states independence, but not true sovereignty. Social science, however, sees beyond ideological distortions, discerning the persistence of economic structures established during the colonial period, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of a colonial relation between the colonizer and the colonized. By the 1960s, the most enlightened social scientific knowledge could affirm that a neocolonial world-system had emerged, built on a foundation of conquest, colonial domination, and economic exploitation of virtually the entire planet; with the United States as the hegemonic core power.

From the outset, the modern world-system was based on a fundamental contradiction. It was driven to expand without limit through conquest, but it lived on a planet with finite limits. This fundamental contradiction began to express itself in the 1970s, when the world-system began to reach its geographical limits and to overreach its ecologically sustainable limits. As the crisis unfolded, the global elite demonstrated its moral and intellectual incapacity to reorient the system, for the sake of system stability and sustainability. Accordingly, in recent decades, the unsustainability of a world-system built on a foundation of conquest, domination, and exploitation has become increasingly evident, making clear the necessity of an alternative world system based on cooperation and mutually beneficial trade.

The conquered peoples of the world have not accepted the destiny assigned to them by the conquering powers. They formed revolutions, seeking to take back control of their natural resources, their economies, and their destinies. Some of these revolutions are the stuff of popular legend: the Haitian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions. The popular revolutions were led by giants: Toussaint, Mao, Ho, Fidel, among them, and also Sukarno, Nasser, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Bolivar, Allende, Chávez, and Evo. Standing against imperialism, they have sought to create, in theory and in practice, a new international economic order and a sustainable alternative to the neocolonial world-system. They are indicating the necessary road for humanity.

These are the themes that we hope to discuss in this program on **Imperialism and Revolution**, seeking to deepen our understanding in order to make more effective our political action in defense of social justice.

I am Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that seeks a more just, democratic, and sustainable world. We know that a better world is possible, because our peoples have still the capacity to imagine.

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