

Imperialism and Revolution



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The global and historical context of the Cuban Revolution

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A fundamental tendency in human societies since the agricultural revolution, which occurred in different regions of the world from five to ten thousand years ago, has been the formation of kingdoms and empires by means of conquest. Conquest and the formation of empires made possible great advances in commerce, science, technology, philosophy, literature, and art. These apparently opposed phenomena of conquest and civilization are intertwined, establishing a tendency in human history that may be called “the dialectic of domination and development.”

As the human tendency toward development through domination unfolded, there came into being many social systems that transcended political and cultural boundaries, which the U.S. sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein called “world-systems.” They were not world-systems in the sense of encompassing the entire planet, but in the sense that they were systems composed of various “nations” and peoples, yet defined by unifying political and economic structures as well as ideologies; each system formed a single political-economic-ideological world, and hence, a “world-system”.

There have been two types of world-systems, according to Wallerstein, world-empires and world-economies. Both are characterized by a dominating center that controls peripheral regions. In a world-economy, the center transforms the economic institutions of the peripheral regions, so that they function to provide for the productive needs of the center. In contrast, the empire represents a more limited form of domination, in that the economic systems of the peripheral regions are not restructured; simply a tax or tribute is imposed. Most of the great civilizations of the pre-modern Middle East and South Asia as well as those of pre-conquest America and pre-colonial Africa were world-empires. Many of the pre-modern world-systems lasted several centuries, but all were confined to a single region of the world. World-economies were much less rare and tended to be shorter in duration, except for the ancient Chinese civilizations, which were long-lasting world-economies.

This central human tendency toward development through conquest attained advanced expression in the modern era, and the modern nation-state played a pivotal role. Cuban political scientist Armando Cristóbal describes the modern nation-state as characterized by centralization of political authority and common ethnic identification. Centralization was a strong tendency in Western Europe from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, pushed by monarchs and merchants, because of their common interest in overcoming the local power of feudal lords. National ethnic identification took shape in Spain, England, and France, Cristóbal maintains, as a result of wars of conquest reinforced by natural geographical boundaries. Common ethnic identification forged the unity of peoples of diverse cultural-religious traditions in a territory governed by a single state.

A modern, centralized nation-state had a greater capacity to mobilize the resources necessary for conquest. Therefore, the formation of modern nation-states in Western Europe by the sixteenth century set the stage for a project of Western European conquest on a global scale. The modern European project of global domination was initiated by the Spanish conquest of America during the sixteenth century. In addition to the factors that had forged the Spanish nation-state, the Spanish conquest of the indigenous nations and peoples of America was made possible by the lack of horses and iron in America, which were central in military conquest; and the limited resistance to disease among the indigenous populations, as a result of their geographical isolation from the population migrations of Africa, Europe, and Asia. The conquest of the Americas promoted the economic development of northwestern Europe, due to the Spanish use of gold extracted from America to purchase manufactured goods from northwestern Europe. On this foundation, the economically advancing nation-states of Western Europe, led by England and France, undertook the conquest of Africa and much of Asia from the period 1750 to 1900. Thus, from 1492 to 1914, seven European nations conquered or took control of virtually the entire world, establishing a modern world-system that is global in scope.

The modern world-economy is the economic component of the modern world-system. It has a geographical division of labor, with particular economic activities carried out in specific geographical regions. There is the core, the historic manufacturing center; the periphery, the supplier of raw materials, such as agricultural and mineral products, on a base of forced and cheap labor; and the semiperiphery, which has some core characteristics and some peripheral characteristics.

The structure of the world-economy generates a fundamental inequality between core and periphery. The economic function of each zone has ensured that the core will have much greater diversity in manufacturing, higher levels of technology, higher wage levels, and higher levels of consumption. The core-peripheral relation has created two different realities: the core with its culture of consumerism, materialism, and individualism; and the periphery, where the basic democratic rights of access to adequate nutrition, housing, education, and health care are denied, giving rise to a popular culture of social struggle and solidarity. In addition, the periphery functions as a market for the surplus manufactured goods of the core, as a consequence of the destruction of much of the traditional manufacturing of the conquered regions. Consequently, the periphery provides a double benefit for the core: it functions as a supplier of cheap raw materials as well as a purchaser of surplus manufactured goods, that is, the goods that exceed the purchasing capacities of the national markets of the core.

The modern world-economy is a capitalist world-economy, organized to maximize profit and to accumulate capital for the owners of productive and commercial enterprises, whom Marx called the bourgeoisie. These owners of enterprises, the bourgeoisie, seek to maximize exploitation of labor in order to maximize profit and the accumulation of capital, and this exploitation of labor takes two forms.

First, there is exploitation in the sense defined by Marx, where the workers are paid less than the value of what they produce, thus enabling profits. Secondly, there is superexploitation, defined by Wallerstein, where the workers are paid less than what they need in order to live, enabling even higher profits.

In the evolution of the capitalist world-economy, workers in the core have been exploited, but for the most part, not superexploited; whereas the majority of workers in the periphery are superexploited. This duality is functional for the world-system system. Low wages are consistent with capitalists' interests, but they limit the capacity of the workers to buy the products that the system produces, thus restraining its capacity to expand. A geographical division in the labor market, in which workers are exploited in one zone and superexploited in another, effectively resolves this dilemma.

This review of historical global dynamics provides a context for understanding Cuba and the Cuban Revolution. Like the majority of peoples and nations, Cuba was conquered, colonized, and peripheralized. And like the majority of peoples, Cuban rebelled and formed popular and revolutionary movements of resistance. But in the case of Cuba, for various reasons, the Cuban Revolution became advanced, so that there has emerged today an intimate, conflictive relation between the most advanced popular revolution of our time and the most powerful empire in human history.

Because of its advanced character, the essence of the Cuban Revolution must be understood by all who seek a more just world. For this reason, I propose in subsequent programs to discuss the history of Cuba and the Cuban Revolution. We will explore the structures of domination of Cuba, the Cuban social and political movements of resistance, and the increasing presence of the United States in Cuba in defense of its neocolonial interests.

We will begin in the next program with discussion of the conquest, colonization, and peripheralization of Cuba from sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

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