

Imperialism and Revolution



Lesson #2

Lucrative trading & the young North American republic

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The defenders of imperialism want to convince the people that the wealthy nations are deserving of their wealth, that they have accumulated material things through hard work and intelligence, and through these qualities, they have made great contributions to humanity. In the case of the USA, these virtues include an ethic of hard work, individual initiative, and practical intelligence.

If we the people are to see through the false claims of the defenders of imperialism, we must understand the actual historical and economic factors that made possible the spectacular U.S. ascent from 1776 to 1968, propelling the nation to economic, military, and political global supremacy by the middle of the twentieth century.

There are seven factors in the spectacular U.S. ascent.

First, a lucrative trading relation with the Caribbean colonies, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, resulting in the accumulation of capital by the middle-class farmers and merchants of the English colonies of North America.

Secondly, territorial conquest by the young American republic of the indigenous nations and Mexico, during the nineteenth century.

Thirdly, the lucrative trading relation between the manufacturing North and slave South, promoting industrial development of the Northeastern region of the United States, during the nineteenth century.

Fourth, concentration of industry and banking, through the morally and legally questionable practices of the “Robber Barons, which increased the productive capacity of the nation, occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Fifth, increased global trade related to the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, enabling U.S. commerce and industry to expand, without the nation suffering from war destruction of its industrial infrastructure.

Sixth, imperialist policies of the twentieth century, involving the use of interventionist strategies to gain access to the natural resources and human labor of various regions of the world, especially Latin America, and to attain access to new markets.

Seventh, the creation of a permanent war economy following the second World War. Expanding war industries drove the continued expansion of the U.S. economy, dominated by the military-industrial complex and politically justified by the Cold War ideology.

These are the seven factors that drove the spectacular U.S. economic ascent from 1776 to 1968. It reasonably can be said that the culture of the United States fostered an ethic of hard work and individual initiative. But these cultural characteristics cannot explain the spectacular U.S. ascent. The key to the nation’s ascent was its capacity to strategically insert itself in an evolving world-economy being forged by conquest, colonial domination, slavery and other forms of forced labor, and superexploitation; without being deterred by its profession of democratic values.

In this and subsequent lessons, we will be exploring the seven factors of the spectacular U.S. ascent in more detail. The first factor, as we have seen, is the lucrative trading relation between the farmers of the English colonies in North America and the slaveholders in the Caribbean islands, from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

The Caribbean islands had been conquered by the Spanish, French, and the British, beginning in the sixteenth century. Conquest resulted in the genocide of the indigenous populations of the islands, due to the disruption of their economies, the harsh conditions of forced labor, and the spread of diseases against which the relatively isolated island populations had evolved less immunity.

The conquerors subsequently turned to the development of sugar plantations on a basis of African slave labor, oriented to the market in Europe. This system of raw materials export-production based on African forced labor defined the Caribbean islands from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries.

The domestic economy of the West Indian plantations mandated that they not cultivate food or domesticate animals. The most profitable strategy for the plantation owners was to devote all resources to the cultivation of sugar cane and the exportation of sugar, and to purchase imported food products and animals. This profit rationale created an international market for these goods.

Here is where the middle-class farmers in the English colonies of New England and the Middle Atlantic enter the story. They were strategically located to respond to the market for food products. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, they had a lucrative trading relation with the slaveholders of the Caribbean, selling a variety of food products, leading to their accumulation of capital. If the full truth be told, our New England and Middle Atlantic farmers were not ordinary farmers, but farmers who were experiencing the rapid accumulation of capital.

This Caribbean commercial connection of the young American Republic is not widely recognized. History books tend to focus on the internal dynamics of the rapid expansion of the U.S. economy, without mentioning this important international connection.

The lucrative trade of the North American farmers with the Caribbean slaveholders involved complicity with slavery, undertaken not out of economic necessity, but for the purpose of economic gain. Evolving during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the West Indian trade came into being before the establishment of the North American Republic, and before slavery in its own territory became central to its economic development.

But this historic complicity with slavery was not seen, much less debated. It was simple enough to see the economic development of the nation as driven by the efforts and initiative of the people, without observing the role of trade in promoting economic development. Moreover, the West Indian trade could be included in the more general category of foreign commerce, obscuring its particular economic importance and its moral significance.

Such blindness with respect to the moral implications of the Caribbean trade was an important initial step in the shaping of the political culture of the North American republic. As the nation established itself on a moral foundation of democratic values, it adapted its understanding of democracy to the requirements of its economic expansion and economic development. And its evolving national narrative would have the tendency to overlook fundamental but inconvenient facts.

The emancipation of our peoples, including the peoples of the United States, requires us to see through the adaptations of universal moral concepts to the particular interests of the powerful, and it requires us to reclaim historical omissions in the stories of our peoples and nations. As is well understood in Cuba, knowledge is a powerful weapon of the people, central to their emancipation by and for themselves.

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



Radio Habana Cuba