

The specter of barbarism and its alternative: eight theses

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One. The capitalist economic crisis is not over.

Although the immediate financial crisis appears to have been resolved, all of the underlying factors (which are the result of the overaccumulation to which capitalism is prone and which made fictitious capital so vulnerable) are still present. The incredible trade imbalance of the US economy has not been addressed; the unprecedented deficit of the US federal budget is rising; the over-extension of consumer credit hangs over the economy; unemployment is rising and thus consumer confidence and spending is not likely to return to previous heights; and, the general picture is one in which the US economy, the dominant economy in the world, will continue to lose hegemony. When commentators stress signs of recovery, it is essential to remember that this pattern differs not at all from that of 1929 to 1933 -- in other words, the period between the stock market crash and the bank failures--- a period before much of the depression of the 1930s. At best, although capitalism itself may recover, the prospect is one of a significant geographical restructuring of capital on an international basis, which will require a painful adjustment for the US economy -- one which involves acceptance of continued stagnation or decline of incomes for the mass of people.

Two. The resource/food/water/climate/environment crisis is deepening.

All these elements are connected. There is a food crisis which reflects, among other things, drought as the result of climate change and the diversion of food for the production of biofuels. Despite the ability to produce sufficient food at this time for the world, unequal distribution has meant starvation for many and has been reflected in food riots over the price of staple products like rice. There is a process of land grab occurring in which countries such as China, India, South Korea and Saudi Arabia are in the process of leasing land in Africa, Pakistan, and the Philippines among other places for the purpose of securing food (especially grain) and fuels. For example, Daewoo of South Korea took a 99 year lease on 3,000,000 acres of land in Madagascar (half of all arable land in the country) for the purpose of producing corn and palm oil. Similarly, Pakistan offered a half million hectares of land and promised Gulf investors that if they signed up it would hire a security force of 100,000 to protect the assets. A significant aspect of these contracts which secure arable land for foreign investors is that it is a way of dealing with the impending crisis of water shortage. And, this problem is becoming increasingly serious with the melting of glaciers for example in Tibet and the Andes -- which will affect the availability of water not only for consumption and agriculture but also for hydroelectric power. This problem, the problem of over-expansion of economic activity in relation to existing resources under capitalism, will only get worse as India and China in particular attempt to emulate the consumption standards of the developed North.

Three. The current internal political correlation of forces in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries is not favorable to the advance of progressive forces.

Here we can simply note the recent rightwing victories in elections in Germany, Italy and France, in the European Union, as well as the current prospect of a smashing defeat of the Labor government in England. Of course, it is stretching matters to think of these defeats for social democracy as defeats of progressive forces; however, what is evident is the failure of the left, of trade union organizations and social movements to make significant gains in this time of capitalist crisis. To this, it is important to add the very successful mobilization of forces in the United States against health-care reform. What is striking is the composition of that mass opposition: the so-called "tea party" movement has been attacking not only Obama, not only big government and socialism but also Wall Street and corporations -- and so many of those who have marched describe themselves as working class. There is no comparable mobilization of the working class from the left in the United States.

Four. In the context of resource shortages, the struggle to control resource supplies will become intense. That struggle is not likely to take the form of market and financial domination; rather, force will decide. This is one aspect of the specter of barbarism.

Five. In the absence of strong political movements on the left, the response in the United States in particular and in other advanced capitalist countries is likely to be one best analyzed by psychologists.

For example, in the United States (where it is a matter of faith that "this is the greatest country in the world"), the reaction to the changing world capitalist economy will be a tendency toward protectionism, xenophobia (manifested in particular against Muslims), quick military solutions, racism and attacks upon immigrants who are seen as stealing good jobs. In short, the likely response will be the search for scapegoats -- those responsible for stealing the birthrights of true Americans. As we can see already in Europe (for example, in the fascist attacks upon the Roma people in Hungary), this is another aspect of the specter of barbarism.

Six. The old concepts of socialism, the characteristics of socialism of the 20th century, will never challenge the mass psychology which prevails in advanced capitalist countries.

If there is anything clear in the reaction of masses in developed capitalist countries to the initial appearance of this crisis within capitalism, it is that the concept of a big state, of verticalism, of interference by distant entities (not only big government but also big companies) is precisely what people do not want. For them, that is the enemy.

Seven. The concept of socialism for the 21st century, with its emphasis upon communal councils and workers councils, is the only way to make inroads on the working class of advanced capitalist countries at this point.

What people do respond to favorably is the idea of local decision-making and the ability to make the decisions that affect their lives -- precisely because that option has been removed in advanced capitalist countries. Those are precisely the elements needed for the battle of ideas in order to struggle against barbarism.

Eight. At this time, only Venezuela offers the vision that can arm militants around the world in the battle of ideas in the struggle against barbarism. For that reason, a special responsibility falls upon Venezuela. It not only must struggle against state domination and verticalism and for development of those protagonistic institutions which alone can transform people. This struggle is essential for the health of the Venezuelan revolution; however, the success of this struggle also is needed to provide an example internationally in order to defeat the specter of barbarism.