

Imperialist chaos, ecological disaster: Twin-track to capitalist oblivion Submitted by InternationalReview on 3 June 07 (<http://en.internationalism.org/ir/129/editorial>)

Frederick Engels predicted more than a century ago that capitalist society would ultimately drag human society down into barbarism if left to its own devices. Indeed, the evolution of imperialist war over the last hundred years has provided more and more horrifying details of how this prediction would be realised. Today, the capitalist world increasingly offers another route to the apocalypse, complementary to that of imperialist war, through a “man-made” ecological meltdown that in the span of a few generations could make the earth as inhospitable to human life as Mars. Despite the recognition of this perspective by the defenders of the capitalist order, there is absolutely nothing effective they can do to stop it, because both imperialist war and climate catastrophe have been brought about by the unnatural perpetuation of their dying mode of production.

Imperialist war = barbarism

The bloody fiasco of the invasion in 2003 of Iraq by the US-led “coalition” marks a defining moment in the development of imperialist war towards the very destruction of society. Four years on, Iraq, instead of being liberated, has been turned into what bourgeois journalists euphemistically call a “broken society”, where the population, already butchered by the Gulf war of 1991, and then bled white by a decade of economic sanctions,^[1] is subjected to suicide bombings, to daily pogroms by various “insurgents”, to assassination by death squads of the Interior Ministry or arbitrary elimination by the occupying forces. And the situation in Iraq is only the focal point of a process of militarised disintegration and chaos that is also to be found in Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, the Lebanon, Afghanistan and which constantly threatens to engulf new areas of the globe, not excluding the central capitalist metropolises as indicated by the spread of terrorist bombings to New York, Madrid, and London during the first decade of this century. Far from creating a new order in the Middle East, US military power has only brought a spreading militarised chaos.

In a sense none of this military carnage on a mass scale is new. The First World War of 1914-18 already took the first major step toward a barbaric “future”. The mutual slaughter of millions of young workers forced into the trenches by their respective imperialist masters, left in its wake a pandemic of “Spanish flu” that stole the lives of millions more, while the former European national powerhouses of capitalist industry were brought to their knees economically. After the failure of the 1917 October Revolution, and of the workers insurrections it inspired in the rest of the world in the 1920s, the way was open to a still more catastrophic episode of total warfare in the 2nd World War of 1939-45. Defenceless civilians of major cities were now a principal target of systematic mass killing from the air, and a multi-million genocide took place in the heart of European civilisation.

Then the “Cold War” from 1947-89 produced a whole series of equally destructive carnages, in Korea, in Vietnam, in Cambodia and throughout Africa, while a global nuclear holocaust between the USA and the USSR remained a continual threat.

What is new in the imperialist war of today is not yet its absolute levels of destruction, since recent military conflicts, while waged with far more deadly firepower than before, at least on the part of the US, have still to engulf the major concentrations of people in the heartlands of capitalism as happened in the 1st and 2nd World Wars. What is different is that the ending of human society altogether by such war now appears in a much more clear form. In 1918 Rosa Luxemburg likened the barbarism of the 1st World War to the decline of Ancient Rome and the Dark Ages that followed. Today even this dramatic comparison seems inadequate to express the endless horror that capitalist barbarism has in store for us. While for all the brutality and mayhem of the previous two world wars last century, they still gave way to long periods of relative stability, there was still a perspective - even if ultimately illusory - of reconstructing social order in the interests of the dominant imperialist powers. All the military flashpoints of the contemporary situation, by contrast, offer no perspective from the warring factions except a further descent into social fragmentation at all levels, a real decomposition of the social order, of chaos without end.

The impasse of US imperialism is that of capitalism

Most of the American bourgeoisie has been forced to recognise that its imperialist strategy of the unilateral imposition of its world hegemony, whether at the diplomatic, military or ideological level, has backfired. The report of the Iraq Study Group to the US Congress doesn't hide this obvious fact. Instead of strengthening the prestige of US imperialism the occupation of Iraq has weakened it at almost all levels. But what do the severest critics of the Bush policy within the dominant class in the US propose as an alternative? Withdrawal is impossible without further weakening US hegemony and helping accelerate the gathering chaos. A division of Iraq along ethnic lines would also have the same effect. Some even propose a return to the policy of containment as practised in the cold war. But its clear there can be no return to the world order of the two imperialist blocs. So the fiasco in Iraq is far worse than the one in Vietnam, since unlike in the latter war, the US is now trying to contain the entire world and not just its rival bloc of the USSR. As a result, despite the scathing criticism by the ISG and the control of the US Congress by the Democratic Party, President Bush has been allowed to increase troops in Iraq by at least another 20,000, and embark on a new policy of diplomatic and military threats toward Iran. Whatever alternative strategies are being considered by the American ruling class, it will be obliged sooner or latter to make another bloody proof of its superpower status with even more dire consequences for the world's populations, which will accelerate still further the spread of barbarism.

All this is not the result of the ineptitude and arrogance of the Republican Bush administration and the neo-conservatives as the bourgeoisies of other imperialist powers keep telling us. A return to the United Nations and multi-

lateralism is not an option for peace as they and assorted pacifists claim. The UN, as Washington understands very well, had become a forum since 1989 for the frustration of US wishes: a place where its less powerful rivals could delay, water down or even veto American policy in order to prevent their positions being further weakened. In presenting the US as the only purveyor of war and chaos, France, Germany, and others only reveal their full part in the present destructive logic of imperialism: where each power is only out for itself and must oppose itself to all the others. Not surprisingly the regular marches to "Stop the War" in the metropolises of the main powers usually give vociferous support to the smaller imperialist gangsters in the middle East, like the insurgents in Iraq or Hezbollah in the Lebanon who are fighting the US. In so doing they reveal that imperialism is a relationship from which no nation can hold aloof, and that war is not just the result of the aggression of the biggest powers. Still others claim, despite all the evidence, that the US adventure in Iraq is a "war for oil", thus completely obscuring the danger posed by its overriding geo-strategic objectives. This is a considerable underestimation of the gravity of the present situation. In reality the impasse in which American imperialism finds itself in Iraq is only a manifestation of the global impasse in which capitalist society finds itself. George Bush Senior announced that the dissolution of the Russian bloc would open into a new era of peace and stability, a "New World order". Rapidly, with the first Gulf War then the barbaric conflict in Yugoslavia, in the heart of Europe, reality proved the opposite. The 1990s were not those of a world order but of a growing military chaos. Ironically it has fallen to George Bush junior to lead a new decisive step into irreversible chaos.

Deterioration of the biosphere

At the same time as capitalism in decomposition unleashed an imperialist trend towards a more clearly perceivable barbarism, so it also speeded up an assault of such ferocity on the biosphere that an artificially created climatic holocaust could also wipe out human civilisation, and human life. It is clear from the consensus of the world's climate scientists in the February 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that the theory that the over-warming of the planet by the accumulation of relatively high levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is caused by the large scale burning of fossil fuels, is no longer merely a hypothesis but "very likely". Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere retains the sun's heat reflected off the earth's surface and radiates it in the surrounding air, leading to the "greenhouse effect". This process of radiative forcing began to take significant effect from around 1750, at the beginning of the capitalist industrial revolution, and since then the rise in carbon dioxide emissions and the warming of the planet has increased. Since 1950 this dual increase has begun to accelerate in a steep upward curve, with new planetary temperature records established almost yearly in the past decade. The consequences of this anthropogenic warming of the planet have already started to appear on an alarming scale: changing weather patterns leading both to repeated droughts and widescale flooding, deadly heatwaves in Northern Europe and extreme climatic conditions of hugely destructive power, which in turn are already rapidly increasing famine and disease in the third world, and leading to the massive migration of populations from affected areas, and the ruination of whole cities like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Capitalism of course can't be blamed with starting the burning of fossil fuels or acting on the environment in other ways to produce unforeseen and dangerous consequences. Indeed this has been going on since the dawn of human civilisation:

"The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year, and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy seasons. Those who spread the potato in Europe were not aware that with these farinaceous tubers they were at the same time spreading scrofula. Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature - but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly."^[2]

Capitalism is nevertheless responsible for enormously accelerating this process of environmental damage. Not by industrialisation per se, but as a result of capitalism's overriding quest to maximise profits and its consequent disregard for human and ecological needs, except insofar as they coincide with the goal of wealth accumulation. Furthermore the capitalist mode of production has other characteristics which contribute to the wanton destruction of the environment: the intrinsic competitiveness between capitalists, especially between each nation state which, at least in the last analysis, prevents any real co-operation at the world level; and, linked to this, the tendency of capitalism toward overproduction in its unquenchable search for profit.

In decadent capitalism, in its period of permanent crisis, this tendency towards overproduction becomes chronic. This has been particularly clear since the end of the Second World War when the expansion of the capitalist economies has taken place artificially, partly through the policy of deficit financing, by a huge expansion of debt of all kinds in the economy. This has not led to the satisfaction of the needs of the mass of the working population who remain mired in poverty, but to enormous waste: to mountains of unsold goods, to the dumping of millions of tonnes of food, to planned

obsolescence in the production of huge numbers of products from cars to computers that soon become scrap, to an enormous “parity of products” produced by innumerable competitors for the same market demand.

In addition, while the rate of technological change and sophistication increases in decadence, the resulting innovations, contrary to the situation in the ascendant period of capitalism, tend to be stimulated by certain sectors of the economy, particularly the military sector. Meanwhile at the level of the infrastructure: buildings, sanitation, energy production, transportation systems we see very few revolutionary developments on the scale that characterised the emergence of the capitalist economy. In the period of capitalist decomposition, the final phase of decadence, there is an acceleration of the opposite tendency, of the attempt to reduce the cost of maintaining even the ageing infrastructure in the search for immediate profits. This process is seen in caricatural form in the current expansion of production in China and India, where an industrial infrastructure is largely absent. Instead of giving a new lease of life for capitalism, it is leading to astronomical levels of pollution: the destruction of whole river systems, enormous blankets of smog that cover several countries, etc.

This long process of decay and decomposition of the capitalist mode of production may help to explain why there has been such a dramatic acceleration in carbon dioxide emissions and the warming of the planet in recent decades. It also helps to explain why, in the face of such entrenched economic and climatic developments, capitalism and its “policy makers” will be unable to reverse the catastrophic effect of global warming.

Both these apocalyptic scenarios, which can destroy human civilisation itself, are to some extent recognised and publicised by the spokesmen and media of the elites of all the capitalist nations. That they recommend innumerable remedies to avoid these outcomes doesn’t mean that any of them therefore provide a realistic alternative to the barbaric perspectives outlined. On the contrary. In front of the ecological disaster and imperialist barbarity that it has generated, capitalism is equally powerless.

Hot air on global warming

The governments of the world have generously funded the research of the IPCC since 1990 through the UN and have had their media widely publicise its most stark recent findings.

In turn the bourgeoisie’s major political parties in all countries are turning various shades of green. But on closer inspection the eco-policies of these parties, however radical they might appear, have deliberately obscured the seriousness of the problem, because the only solution to it threatens the very system whose praises they sing. The common denominator of all these green campaigns is that they have the effect of preventing a development of revolutionary consciousness amongst a population rightly horrified at the perspective of global warming. The constant eco-message from the governments is that “saving the planet is everyone’s responsibility” when the vast majority is deprived of any political or economic power and control over production and consumption, over what and how things are produced. And the bourgeoisie, which does have power in these decisions, has even less intention than ever in satisfying human and ecological needs at the expense of profit.

Al Gore, who narrowly failed to become US Democratic president in 2000, has put himself at the head of an international campaign against carbon emissions with the film “An inconvenient truth” that won a Hollywood Oscar for its graphic treatment of the danger of the rise in world temperatures, melting of the polar ice caps, the raising of sea levels and all the resultant devastation. But the film is also an election platform for Al Gore himself. He isn’t the only senior politician to realise that the justified fear of the populations with the ecological crisis can be harnessed in the scramble for power that characterises the democratic game in the major capitalist countries. In France the contenders in the presidential election have all signed the “ecological pact” of journalist star Nicolas Hulot. In Britain all the major political parties have vied with each other to see who is the greenest of them all. The Stern Report, commissioned by Gordon Brown of New Labour, has been followed by further government initiatives to reduce carbon emissions. David Cameron, leader of the Tory opposition, cycles to the Houses of Parliament (while his entourage brings up the rear in a Mercedes).

One only has to look at the results of previous government policies to cut down carbon emissions to see the inability of the capitalist states to be effective in this regard. Instead of a stabilisation of greenhouse gas emissions at 1990s level by 2000, that the signatories to the Kyoto Protocol modestly committed themselves to in 1997, there was instead an increase of 10.1% in the major industrialised countries by the end of the century, and it is forecast that this pollution will have increased by 25.3% by 2010! (Deutsche Umwelthilfe).

One only has to look at the complete negligence of the capitalist states towards calamities that have already occurred as a result of climate change to judge the sincerity of their endless good intentions.

There are those who, while recognising that the profit motive is a powerful disincentive to effective limitation of such pollution, believe that the problem can be solved by replacing liberal policies with state organised solutions. But it’s clear, above all at the international level, that the capitalist states, however organised internally, are unable to co-operate on this question because each one would have to make different economic sacrifices as a result. Capitalism is competition, and today, more than ever, is dominated by the rule of every man for himself.

The capitalist world is unable to unite in a common project as massive and costly as the complete transformation of industry and transport to drastically reduce the use of carbon burning energy. On the contrary the main concern of each capitalist nation is to try and use this problem to further its own sordid ambitions. As on the imperialist and military levels, so on the ecological level, capitalism is riven by insuperable national divisions, and so cannot answer in a meaningful way the most pressing needs of humanity.

All is not lost for the proletarians: they still have a world to win

But it would be quite wrong to take a resigned attitude and think human society must necessarily sink into oblivion as a result of these powerful tendencies - of imperialism and eco-destruction - towards barbarism. Fatalism in front of the fatuity of all the capitalist half-measures proposed to bring about peace and harmony with nature is just as mistaken as the naive belief in these cosmetic cures.

Capitalist society, as well as sacrificing everything to the pursuit of profit and competition has also, inadvertently, produced the elements for its destruction as a mode of exploitation. It has created the potential technological and cultural means for a unified and planned world system of production attuned to the needs of human beings and nature. It has produced a class, the proletariat, which has no need for national or competitive prejudices, and every interest in developing international solidarity. The working class has no interest in the rapacious desire for profit. In other words capitalism has laid the basis for a higher order of society, for its supersession by socialism. Capitalism has developed the means to destroy human society, but it has also created its own gravedigger, the working class, that can preserve human society and take it to a higher level.

Capitalism has given rise to a scientific culture that is able to identify and measure invisible gases like carbon dioxide both in the present atmosphere and in the atmosphere of 10,000 years ago. Scientists can identify the specific isotopes of carbon dioxide that result from the burning of fossil fuels. The scientific community has been able to test and verify the hypothesis of the "greenhouse effect". Yet the time has long gone when capitalism as a social system was able to use the scientific method and its results for the benefit of human progress. The bulk of scientific investigation and discovery today is devoted to destruction; to the development of ever more sophisticated methods of mass death. Only a new order of society, a communist society, can put science at the service of humanity.

Despite the past 100 years of the decline and putrefaction of capitalism, and severe defeats for the working class, these building blocks for a new society are still intact.

The resurgence of the world proletariat since 1968 proves that. The development of its class struggle against the constant pressure on proletarian living standards over the ensuing decades prevented the barbaric outcome promised by the cold war: of an all-out confrontation between the imperialist blocs. Since 1989 however and the disappearance of the blocs, the defensive posture of the working class has been unable to prevent the succession of horrific local wars that threaten to spiral out of control, drawing in more and more parts of the planet. In this period, of capitalist decomposition, the proletariat no longer has time on its side, particularly as a pressing ecological catastrophe must now be added into the historic equation.

But we cannot say yet that the decline and decomposition of capitalism has reached the "point of no return" – the point at which its barbarism could never be reversed.

Since 2003 the working class has begun to re-enter the struggle with renewed vigour after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc brought about a temporary halt to the resurgence begun in 1968.

In these conditions of developing class confidence, the increasing dangers represented by imperialist war and ecological catastrophe instead of inducing feelings of impotence and fatalism, can lead to a greater political reflection on, and consciousness of, the stakes of the world situation, and on the necessity for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society. It is the responsibility of revolutionaries to participate actively in this coming to consciousness.

Como 3.4.07

[1]. Infant mortality in Iraq rose from 40 per 1000 in 1990 to 102 per 1000 in 2005. The Times, March 26, 2007.

[2]. Frederick Engels: "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man". Marx, Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 25.