

If Socialism Fails: The Spectre of 21st Century Barbarism

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From the first day it appeared online, *Climate and Capitalism's* masthead has carried the slogan “Ecosocialism or Barbarism: there is no third way.” We’ve been quite clear that ecosocialism is not a new theory or brand of socialism – it is socialism with Marx’s important insights on ecology restored, socialism committed to the fight against ecological destruction. But why do we say that the alternative to ecosocialism is barbarism?

Marxists have used the word “barbarism” in various ways, but most often to describe actions or social conditions that are grossly inhumane, brutal, and violent. It is not a word we use lightly, because it implies not just bad behaviour but violations of the most important norms of human solidarity and civilized life.¹

The slogan “Socialism or Barbarism” originated with the great German revolutionary socialist leader Rosa Luxemburg, who repeatedly raised it during World War I. It was a profound concept, one that has become ever more relevant as the years have passed.

Rosa Luxemburg spent her entire adult life organizing and educating the working class to fight for socialism. She was convinced that if socialism didn’t triumph, capitalism would become ever more barbaric, wiping out centuries of gains in civilization. In a major 1915 antiwar polemic, she referred to Friedrich Engels’ view that society must advance to socialism or revert to barbarism and then asked, “What does a ‘reversion to barbarism’ mean at the present stage of European civilization?”

She gave two related answers.

In the long run, she said, a continuation of capitalism would lead to the literal collapse of civilized society and the coming of a new Dark Age, similar to Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire: “The collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration – a great cemetery.” (*The Junius Pamphlet*)²

By saying this, Rosa Luxemburg was reminding the revolutionary left that socialism is not inevitable, that if the socialist movement failed, capitalism might destroy modern civilization, leaving behind a much poorer and much harsher world. That wasn’t a new concept – it has been part of Marxist thought from its very beginning. In 1848, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. ... that each time ended, either in the

revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, *or in the common ruin of the contending classes.*" (emphasis added)

In Luxemburg's words: "Humanity is facing the alternative: Dissolution and downfall in capitalist anarchy, or regeneration through the social revolution." (*A Call to the Workers of the World*)

Capitalism's two faces

But Luxemburg, again following the example of Marx and Engels, also used the term "barbarism" another way, to contrast capitalism's loudly proclaimed noble ideals with its actual practice of torture, starvation, murder and war.

Marx many times described the two-sided nature of capitalist "progress." In 1853, writing about the British colonial regime in India, he described the "profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization [that] lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked." Capitalist progress, he said, resembled a "hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain." (*The Future Results of British Rule in India*)

Similarly, in a speech to radical workers in London in 1856, he said:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. (*Speech at the Anniversary of the People's Paper*)

Immense improvements to the human condition have been made under capitalism – in health, culture, philosophy, literature, music and more. But capitalism has also led to starvation, destitution, mass violence, torture and even genocide – all on an unprecedented scale. As capitalism has expanded and aged, the barbarous side of its nature has come ever more to the fore.

Bourgeois society, which came to power promising equality, democracy, and human rights, has never had any compunction about throwing those ideals overboard to expand and protect its wealth and profits. That's the view of barbarism that Rosa Luxemburg was primarily concerned about during World War I. She wrote:

Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping in filth, this capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics – as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity – so it appears in all its hideous nakedness ...

A look around us at this moment shows what the regression of bourgeois society into barbarism means. This world war is a regression into barbarism. (*The Junius Pamphlet*)

For Luxemburg, barbarism wasn't a future possibility. It was the *present reality* of imperialism, a reality that was destined to get much worse if socialism failed to stop it. Tragically, she was proven correct. The defeat of the German revolutions of 1919 to 1923, coupled with the isolation and degeneration of the Russian Revolution, opened the way to a century of genocide and constant war.

In 1933, Leon Trotsky described the rise of fascism as “capitalist society ... puking up undigested barbarism.” (*What is National Socialism?*)

Later he wrote: “The delay of the socialist revolution engenders the indubitable phenomena of barbarism – chronic unemployment, pauperization of the petty bourgeoisie, fascism, finally wars of extermination which do not open up any new road.” (*In Defense of Marxism*)

More than 250 million people, most of them civilians, were killed in the wars of extermination and mass atrocities of the 20th Century. The 21st century continues that record: in less than eight years over three million people have died in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Third World, and at least 700,000 have died in “natural” disasters.

As Luxemburg and Trotsky warned, barbarism is already upon us. Only mass action can stop barbarism from advancing, and only socialism can definitively defeat it. Their call to action is even more important today, when capitalism has added massive ecological destruction, primarily affecting the poor, to the wars and other horrors of the 20th Century.

That view has been expressed repeatedly and forcefully by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Speaking in Vienna in May 2006, he referred explicitly to Luxemburg's words:

The choice before humanity is socialism or barbarism. ... When Rosa Luxemburg made this statement, she was speaking of a relatively distant future. But now the situation of the world is so bad that the threat to the human race is not in the future, but now.³

A few months earlier, in Caracas, he argued that capitalism's destruction of the environment gives particular urgency to the fight against barbarism today:

I was remembering Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg and the phrase that each one of them, in their particular time and context put forward; the dilemma “socialism or barbarism.” ...

I believe it is time that we take up with courage and clarity a political, social, collective and ideological offensive across the world – a real offensive that permits us to move progressively, over the next years, the next decades, leaving behind the perverse, destructive, destroyer, capitalist model and go forward in constructing the socialist model to avoid barbarism and beyond that the annihilation of life on this planet.

I believe this idea has a strong connection with reality. I don't think we have much time. Fidel Castro said in one of his speeches I read not so long ago, "tomorrow could be too late, let's do now what we need to do." I don't believe that this is an exaggeration. The environment is suffering damage that could be irreversible – global warming, the greenhouse effect, the melting of the polar ice caps, the rising sea level, hurricanes – with terrible social consequences that will shake life on this planet.⁴

Chavez and the revolutionary Bolivarian movement in Venezuela have proudly raised the banner of 21st Century Socialism to describe their goals. As these comments show, they are also raising a warning flag, that the alternative to socialism is 21st Century Barbarism – the barbarism of the previous century amplified and intensified by ecological crisis.

Climate change and 'barbarization'

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been studying and reporting on climate change for two decades. Recently the Vice-Chair of the IPCC, Professor Mohan Munasinghe, gave a lecture at Cambridge University that described "a dystopic possible future world in which social problems are made much worse by the environmental consequences of rising greenhouse gas emissions."

He said: "Climate change is, or could be, the additional factor which will exacerbate the existing problems of poverty, environmental degradation, social polarisation and terrorism and it could lead to a very chaotic situation."

"Barbarization," Munasinghe said, is already underway. We face "a situation where the rich live in enclaves, protected, and the poor live outside in unsustainable conditions."⁵

A common criticism of the IPCC is that its reports are too conservative, that they understate how fast climate change is occurring and how disastrous the effects may be. So when the Vice-Chair of the IPCC says that "barbarization" is already happening, no one should suggest that it's an exaggeration.

The present reality of barbarism

The idea of 21st Century Barbarism may seem farfetched. Even with food and fuel inflation, growing unemployment and housing crises, many working people in the advanced capitalist countries still enjoy a considerable degree of comfort and security.

But outside the protected enclaves of the global north, the reality of "barbarization" is all too evident.

- ▶ 2.5 billion people, nearly half of the world's population, survive on less than two dollars a day.
- ▶ Over 850 million people are chronically undernourished and three times that many frequently go hungry.

- ▶ Every hour of every day, 180 children die of hunger and 1200 die of preventable diseases.
- ▶ Over half a million women die every year from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. 99% of them are in the global south.
- ▶ Over a billion people live in vast urban slums, without sanitation, sufficient living space, or durable housing.
- ▶ 1.3 billion people have no safe water. 3 million die of water-related diseases every year.

The *United Nations Human Development Report 2007-2008* warns that unmitigated climate change will lock the world's poorest countries and their poorest citizens in a downward spiral, leaving hundreds of millions facing malnutrition, water scarcity, ecological threats, and a loss of livelihoods.⁶

In UNDP Administrator Kemal Dervi's words: "Ultimately, climate change is a threat to humanity as a whole. But it is the poor, a constituency with no responsibility for the ecological debt we are running up, who face the immediate and most severe human costs."⁷

Among the 21st Century threats identified by the *Human Development Report*:

- ▶ The breakdown of agricultural systems as a result of increased exposure to drought, rising temperatures, and more erratic rainfall, leaving up to 600 million more people facing malnutrition.
- ▶ An additional 1.8 billion people facing water stress by 2080, with large areas of South Asia and northern China facing a grave ecological crisis as a result of glacial retreat and changed rainfall patterns.
- ▶ Displacement through flooding and tropical storm activity of up to 332 million people in coastal and low-lying areas. Over 70 million Bangladeshis, 22 million Vietnamese, and six million Egyptians could be affected by global warming-related flooding.
- ▶ Expanding health risks, including up to 400 million more people facing the risk of malaria.

To these we can add the certainty that at least 100 million people will be added to the ranks of the permanently hungry this year as a result of food price inflation.

In the UN report, former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu echoes Munasinghe's prediction of protected enclaves for the rich within a world of ecological destruction:

While the citizens of the rich world are protected from harm, the poor, the vulnerable and the hungry are exposed to the harsh reality of climate change in their everyday lives.... We are drifting into a world of "adaptation apartheid."

As capitalism continues with business as usual, climate change is fast

expanding the gap between rich and poor between and within nations, and imposing unparalleled suffering on those least able to protect themselves. That is the reality of 21st Century Barbarism.

No society that *permits* that to happen can be called civilized. No social order that *causes* it to happen deserves to survive.

Notes

1 In "Empire of Barbarism" (*Monthly Review*, December 2004), John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark provide an excellent account of the evolution of the word "barbarism" and its present-day implications.

The best discussion of Rosa Luxemburg's use of the word is in Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (NLB 1976), which unfortunately is out of print.

2 The works of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg and Trotsky that are quoted in this article can be found online in the Marxists Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/

3 Hands Off Venezuela, May 13, 2006

4 *Green Left Weekly*, August 31, 2005

5 "Expert warns climate change will lead to 'barbarisation'" *Guardian*, May 15, 2008

6 United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 2007/2008*

7 "Climate change threatens unprecedented human development reversals." UNDP News Release, Nov. 27, 2007