

SECTION V: THE STAGE OF IMPERIALISM

I. Starting a new area of study

After a brief introduction to the study and practice of Marxism, we have, thus far in this study group, dealt with only one major area of study: an "Overview of Basic Marxist Analysis." During the seven weeks that we spent on this study area we looked over the general anatomy of Marxist science and philosophy, then surveyed the Marxist theories of economics, politics, and ideology for the era of capitalism.

This week we begin a new major area of study, the "Basic Analysis of the Main Contradictions in Contemporary Capitalism." As the title of this area suggests, we will now move to a less general level of study; we will be confronting more directly some of the problems that we face in our political work. Mao proposed in "On Contradiction" that, for Marxism, there are "two processes of cognition: one from the particular to the general, and the other, from the general to the particular." Our study group is mainly organized on the basis of the second process. We have seen something of how Marxist theory addresses the most general problems of capitalism, and we will now see how it analyses some of the more particular ones.

We will concentrate on this area of study for five weeks, and will focus successively on the contradictions of imperialism, of classes in advanced capitalism, of racism and the oppression of national minorities; and of sexism and the oppression of women.

II. Introduction to this section of study

This new area of study begins with a two-week section on imperialism. Because many Marxists and non-Marxists alike frequently misunderstand what Marxism means by imperialism, we want to introduce this section of our study with a short discussion of the historical materialist definition of this concept.

Two misunderstandings of the Marxist definition of imperialism are most common. The first is based on the very real fact that capitalism was international in character from its very inception. Realizing this, some people come to believe that Marxism defines imperialism as the unequal system of international relationships that corresponds to capitalism in general. In reality Marxism identifies imperialism as a particular stage of world capitalism that only began to emerge in the late nineteenth century, for at this point world capitalism began to undergo a profound transformation. As Lenin put it, "Even the capitalist colonial policy of the previous stages of capitalism is essentially different from the colonial policy..." of the stage of imperialism. Marxists (eg, Harry Magdoff) sometimes refer to the stage of imperialism as the "new imperialism" to make this distinction clear.

The second common misunderstanding of the Marxist definition of imperialism is related to (and often accompanies) the first. This is the notion that Marxism sees imperialism solely as a system of international relations--as simply colonial and neo-colonial policy. However, Marxism goes much deeper than this. It identifies imperialism with basic structural transformations in the very core of capitalism,

in the capitalist mode of production itself. Lenin indicated this when he wrote that the "briefest possible definition of imperialism" is "the monopoly stage of capitalism." To reword Lenin slightly, imperialism is the domination of the capitalist mode of production, in its monopoly phase, on a world scale.

From this definition it follows that when we study imperialism, we study more than just international relations. The latter is just one facet of the problem. To study imperialism as a whole, we must study at least three related but distinct facets of this phenomenon: imperialism as manifested in the advanced capitalist societies (the "metropolises"), in the dominated and dependent societies (the "periphery" or "Third World"), and in the structure of relations between societies. Our readings and discussion for this section will be organized around these "three facets" of imperialism.

THE FIRST WEEK

III. Readings for the first week of this section

a. Harry Magdoff's "Imperialism: A Historical Survey"

Harry Magdoff is one of the best-known contemporary US Marxist theorists. His particular field is the study of imperialism. He has written numerous articles and several books dissecting the various structures and mechanisms of imperialism, and studying its historical trajectory. Many of these works have been translated into a number of foreign languages. He is currently co-editor (with Paul Sweezy) of the important Marxist journal, Monthly Review.

Our reading by Magdoff, "Imperialism: a Historical Survey", is characteristic of his work in that it is easy to read, yet subtle and rigorous. This essay does a number of things: it quickly reviews Lenin's theory of imperialism, puts it in context, notes and explains its omissions, then goes on to propose five historical stages of European expansion. Of these five stages, the first three refer to the period prior to the rise of imperialism proper (Magdoff often labels this expansion prior to imperialism "the old imperialism"). The last two stages refer to the phase of imperialism itself (which Magdoff calls "the new imperialism").

The main reason that we are reading this essay is to get a sense of the nature of European expansion and of world capitalism before the actual rise of imperialism. Therefore, for the purpose of our first week's study, we should concentrate most on Magdoff's analysis of the three stages of the "old imperialism." We will draw on Magdoff's review and extension of Lenin's theory of the "new imperialism" next week. To help the reader study these first three stages, we have provided a chart (next page) based on Magdoff's argument. It should be noted that when Magdoff discusses each of his stages, he makes some reference to each of the "three facets" (characteristics of the advanced societies, the "international" system, and the dependent societies) that we outlined above. And the chart divides his argument into these three facets and adds a point or two to his argument. In our discussion of Magdoff, we will want to address each of these three facets for each of his stages of European expansion--and we will have to supplement Magdoff some.

b. Lenin's Imperialism, chapters I-III

The classical historical materialist text on the subject of imperialism comes from Lenin. His book, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, was written in 1916 at the height of the First World Imperialist War. It was Lenin's main contribution to an international debate on the nature and sources of imperialism--a debate that raged for the first two decades of the century. This debate resulted in other important works by non-Marxists (Hobson and Schumpeter), Marxists-turned-opportunists (Hilferding and Kautsky), and Marxists (Luxemburg, Bukharin). Lenin's work drew on a number of these other contributions, and, though short, his essay was crucial to the overall debate. Its modest length, furthermore, obscures the fact that it was thoroughly researched (the research notes fill a volume of Lenin's Collected Works), and was the product of intensive collaboration among a group of Bolshevik theorists.

The context in which Lenin wrote this essay, aside from World War I and the international debate, was the development of an objectively class-collaborationist attitude toward imperialism within the revisionist trend of the badly split international socialist movement. This class-collaborationist attitude was principally represented in theory by Karl Kautsky's notion of "ultra-imperialism," which Lenin reviews and criticizes sharply in his essay.

The main problem that people have when reading Lenin's Imperialism is linked to Lenin's intentions when he wrote it. Notice that this essay is subtitled "A Popular Outline," indicating that Lenin was aiming at a broad audience. To convince this audience, Lenin assembled a great deal of evidence to confirm his major points. This, plus the fact that it is largely a work in economics, can make Imperialism tedious reading. To avoid boredom, we suggest that this essay be read strategically--that the reader (1) concentrate on Lenin's major propositions, and (2) skim through the supporting data to check if and how it validates his main argument.

Our reading for this week consists of only the first three chapters of this essay. In these chapters Lenin focuses on the transformations that imperialism has wrought in the advanced capitalist societies--the first of the "three facets" of imperialism. To facilitate the reading of these chapters, we suggest that special attention be paid to: the relationship between monopoly and competitive capitalism; how monopoly develops in industry; how the role of banking is transformed; the relationship of monopoly banking to monopoly industry; and the nature of "finance capital" and the "financial oligarchy."

Additionally, we want to alert people to a subtler, yet important aspect of Lenin's argument. Scattered through the first three chapters are numerous references to structural changes in business enterprises and State apparatuses. Some examples of such references include Lenin's observations on the "collective capitalist", the "vast separation" between "ownership" and the "application of capital to production," and on "State monopoly capitalism." We will consider the underlying meanings of such references during our discussion group.

III. The discussion for the first week

During the discussion for the first week of this section, we

suggest that the first order be to review Magdoff's basic argument on the three stages of the "old imperialism." When doing this we should proceed stage by stage, reviewing each of the "three facets" of the world system for each stage, comparing each stage to the others, etc. The chart we provided in this study guide should be helpful during this discussion. Also, people should be prepared to draw on their existing knowledge of history to illustrate Magdoff's stages. Because we (as always) have a lot of material to cover, this part of our discussion section should take no more than $\frac{1}{2}$ of our time.

Secondly, after dealing with Magdoff, we should move to discuss the first three chapters of Lenin, concentrating on the points suggested above in this study guide. By doing this we will be reviewing only the "first facet" of the imperialist stage--the advanced countries. Again, the other two facets are our topics for next week. Moreover, certain points made by Magdoff in his essay can be brought into this discussion

Finally we should end with a non-ritualized criticism/self-criticism.

* * * * *

THE SECOND PART OF THIS STUDY GUIDE WILL BE DISTRIBUTED AT THE FIRST WEEK'S DISCUSSION SESSION.