

## **The Descent into Barbarism\***

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In The Junius Pamphlet written from jail in 1915, Rosa Luxemburg had said that the choice before mankind was between barbarism and socialism. Liberal opinion would contest this, arguing that the barbarism that marked the two world wars and the period in between was unrelated to capitalism; indeed the liberal tendency that comes to the fore under capitalism, it would claim, fought against the barbarism of that period. Capitalism, it would assert, has been characterised by the ascendancy of humane values to an unprecedented extent, as the post-war years have shown.

To talk about humane values coming to the fore under capitalism however is to ignore the phenomenon of imperialism altogether. The inflicting of famines in India under British rule are well-known: this rule began with a famine in Bengal in 1770 that killed ten million persons, a third of the population of the province, because of the rapacity of its revenue demands; towards the end of this rule there was yet another famine in Bengal in 1943 because of the utterly cruel war-financing policy pursued by the government that again killed at least three million persons. German rule in (today's) Namibia had introduced death camps that exterminated large numbers of the tribal population and constituted the "models" for Hitler's concentration-cum-death camps in the 1930s. Belgian atrocities in the Congo under Leopold's rule involving the mutilation of human beings are too well-known and too gruesome to recount. And European settler colonialism in the temperate regions of the world eliminated local populations on a vast scale, herded those who survived into reservations, and took over their lands and habitats. One can go on with this litany of cruelty; what is important is that the motive forth is cruelty was plain material gain, which is what characterises capitalism.

It would of course be argued that loot and plunder have provided the motive for wars and conquests even earlier, long before capitalism came into being; so why should one drag capitalism into it? The answer is two-fold: first, all talk of capitalism advancing humane values, it follows, is just hyperbole; at best it is no better than what had preceded it. And second, loot and plunder of the earlier periods were very different from what happens under capitalism. The earlier loot still left something with those who were plundered, or at least allowed them to recoup their losses over time (even though this might invite further plunder later); but under capitalism there is a permanent expropriation of the oppressed.

Capitalism had projected this image of itself, as humane force that fought all barbaric tendencies, in the post-war period. Using in particular Hollywood movies, it sought to give the impression that the second world war was essentially a fight between western liberal democracy and fascism, and downplaying the decisive role of the Soviet Union in the war. As a result, the immense sympathy that had existed for the Soviet Union all over the world, including in the west, was systematically made to diminish among the people of the advanced capitalist countries. They were given the impression that they were living within a humane system the like of which had never existed before. Rosa Luxemburg's remark was portrayed as lacking any relevance, notwithstanding the Vietnam and other wars that marked the post-war period, not to mention the

depredations of the CIA all over the world in effecting regime change and acts of terror during those years.

This illusion of capitalism being a humane force however is now over. The barbarity of capitalism is evident at present like never before, and the most heart-rending, the most incredibly cruel instance of it is the genocide of the Palestinians that is currently occurring with the combined blessings of all advanced capitalist countries. At least 28,000 of the civilian population have been killed, of whom almost 70 percent have been women and children; in fact more than 1,00,000 are missing, a large number of whom are believed to have been killed, taking the toll well above 28,000. Much of the population has been bombed out of their homes and even relief operations have been impaired with the UNRWA funding being suspended by the capitalist powers. The Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, a UN body, has called what is happening in Gaza the “deadliest 100 days in the 21st century”. We are in short witnessing a human catastrophe, which is unleashed by an utterly inhumane and aggressive Zionist regime with the active support of the big capitalist powers.

The aggressiveness of the Zionist State is so blatant that it even threatened the South African foreign minister with dire consequences for herself and her family, when South Africa went to the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of genocide. The court upheld the substance of South Africa’s case, and asked Israel to desist from any genocidal actions, though it stopped short of ordering an immediate end to its war in Gaza. What was striking was that everyone of the advanced capitalist powers supported Israel, with the US calling the legal action “meritless”, and France and Germany arguing that accusing Israel of genocide is to cross a “moral threshold”.

What is striking is that as in 1915 when Rosa Luxemburg was writing, social democracy has been fully complicit even today in the barbarism of advanced capitalism. While ordinary people in the streets everywhere in the world have demonstrated in large and impressive numbers against Israeli aggression, the entire political establishment in the west from the extreme right to social democracy and the Greens, and even a segment to the left of social democracy (such as for instance Die Linke in Germany), has lined up behind imperialism and its protégé, Israeli settler colonialism.

Two questions immediately arise: how has imperialism become so emboldened as to reveal its barbaric self, despite the abhorrence towards this barbarism displayed by world public opinion, especially in the global south? And why has imperialism suddenly become so desperate that it needs to show its barbaric nature? The answer to the first question lies inter alia in the collapse of the Soviet Union and in general the socialist challenge. As long as the Soviet Union lasted, it had acted, at least in the post-war years, as a restraining influence on imperialist barbarism vis-à-vis the global south. The fear of socialism in other words had restrained imperialist barbarism, thereby in a sense vicariously vindicating Rosa Luxemburg’s assertion; that restraint is now gone.

The answer to the second question lies in the fact that the imperial order that had got destabilised earlier, had been made to yield to the drive for decolonisation and third world dirigisme, but had reconstituted itself through the imposition of the neoliberal regime, is again facing a mortal threat; and there is a vital difference between the earlier order and the present one, namely while the earlier pre-war order had been

characterised by inter-imperialist rivalry, the present imperial order is characterised by a muting of rivalry and by an unprecedented unity among imperial powers, because it is presided over by international finance capital that does not want the world divided. The present order therefore has united global capital facing the working people of the world, not just the workers in the advanced capitalist countries but also the workers and peasants in the global south, all of whom have been the victims of this new imperial order.

This very victimisation of the world's working people has produced a crisis for this imperial order, since it has kept down consumption in the world economy and thereby curbed the growth of markets and produced a crisis of over-production. Within the neoliberal regime itself there is no solution to this crisis, since State activism (in the form for in stance of a fiscal deficit-financed increase in State expenditure) is anathema for neoliberalism. As a result, the working people of the world who were already victimised by globally united international capital are now being further victimised via unemployment, making the threat against the new order even more serious.

The crisis has produced fascist regimes within many countries; but it is also producing an acutely repressive global order where both fascist and non-fascist capitalist powers combine to suppress the working people both at home and abroad. There is no scope for any morality in this repression; barbarism is in full display and the capitalist powers stand together in defence of this barbarism, no matter which is the specific power perpetrating it.

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