

The Relationship of Liberalism and Imperialism

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Peace Studies Association keynote speech, March 1990.

Is there an inverse relationship between the expansion of democracy in Europe and the US and poverty and starvation in the Third World? Is it possible that there is a dialectic of enlightenment, whose irony means that greater enlightenment in Europe spells increasing poverty for the rest of the world? Conventional wisdom holds that increasing democracy should mean more enlightened policies towards the Third World and improvement of the conditions of life for all people.

But conventional wisdom has too often been proven wrong.¹ I want to pose the question: Is our common sense about what progress means for the world defied by the relationship of democracy in Europe and poverty in the Third World? If my hypothesis is correct, it certainly does not mean that we should oppose greater democracy in Europe. That would be logically and politically absurd. But it would mean that movements for greater democracy in Europe should take more time to consider the consequences of changes in the global North with regard to the global South.

The latest exponent of conventional wisdom, the kind of conventional wisdom I was just talking about, is Francis Fukuyama, whose hypothesis, published in the *National Interest* in the summer of 1989 in an article entitled "The End of History," is that we have reached the end of history, that the battle of Jena, 1806, when Napoleon defeated the Prussian monarchy, marks the consolidation of the liberal democratic state, and that a linear extension—a spatial extension, in Fukuyama's words—of the principles and privileges of citizenship in a democratic state only have to be extended, that there is nothing left to be invented, in terms of our social organization. In Fukuyama's words,

While there was considerable work to be done after 1806—abolishing slavery and the slave trade, extending the franchise to workers, women, blacks, and other racial minorities, etc.—the basic principles of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon. The two world wars in this century and their attendant revolutions and upheavals simply had the effect of extending these principles spatially, such that the various provinces of human civilization were brought up to the level of its most advanced outpost, and enforcing those societies in Europe and North America at the vanguard of civilization to implement their liberalism more fully.

Fukuyama is wrong in many respects, but I would like to focus on one aspect of what I believe is fundamentally wrong about this analysis by asking the question, whether spatial extension of the principles of the French Revolution meant that the rest of the world made progress? Or, on the contrary, has it been the case historically that the extension of those principles has only resulted in increasing dependency and poverty for the Third World? The worldwide penetration of the economic and political system produced by the American and French revolutions, to be sure, has resulted in some of the most noble forms of political liberty that our species has had the privilege to enjoy. We in the United States enjoy considerable freedom: freedom to travel, freedom to

¹ It used to be thought, for example, that revolutions emerge in times of increasing poverty, when in fact recent research Davies's J-curve and other studies of revolution have shown, in fact, that revolutions emerge after long periods of economic growth and material satisfaction, followed by sharp downturns.

speak. I don't need to remind us that we do, in fact, in so many ways, live in the one of the most free societies in the world. But what are the costs of living in this society? Is there a cost to this liberty in the Third World? We should not forget, for instance, that the Statue of Liberty that France gave to the United States was also planted atop the pagoda for Le Loi in Hanoi, Vietnam. Le Loi was the national leader to in 1418 had helped drive the Mongols out of Vietnam. Today he is still regarded as a national hero, a man whose mythology, the mythology surrounding him—the returned sword lake, the golden turtle that gives him the sword that he uses to drive the Mongols out, and the turtle which reappears later to reclaim the sword—is not unlike that of King Arthur in British history.

Is it simply ironic that the French chose to put a statue of liberty on the pagoda honoring Le Loi? (This act was an affront to the Vietnamese nation, which, I think, portrays the impact of the principles of the spatial extension of the principles of the French Revolution.) It was, after all, during the great war against fascism, a war I think all of us would have supported in its day, when the exploitation of Vietnam was intensified to a great degree. In fact, in a famine from 1944 to 1945, at least a million and a half—possibly two million—Vietnamese starved to death in the North, at the same time as rice exports to France were fueling its liquor industry. So, we can see the blatant disregard for human life (and, in fact, one of the Vietnamese demands was precisely stopping the export of rice for the French liquor industry).

If we look historically at French involvement in Indo-China, the strongest French expansionists were staunch anti-clerical progressives who regarded themselves as the ideological heirs of the French Revolution. As Noam Chomsky reminds us, they were enlightened liberals, much like John Kennedy and his administration were enlightened liberals, carrying forth the most noble and best tradition of our revolutionary heritage. As Minister of Education, Jules Ferry, the first French prime minister to make colonialism and its intensification his principle platform, had defied the Catholic Church in France by making education universal, secular, and obligatory. He had seen that it was France's duty to civilize inferior people, and on May 15, 1883, a full-scale expedition was launched to impose a protectorate on Vietnam. It was the ultra-conservatives in France who objected to this colonial expansion. As Vietnam disappeared, subsumed under the names of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China, even the Vietnamese people lost their identity, as they became referred to as Annamites by the French. Some Vietnamese themselves began to refer to themselves in terms of the liberal values of the enlightenment and the French Revolution.

It was the same French troops, bringing with them civilization, who in 1885 burned the imperial library at Hue, which contained ancient scrolls and manuscripts, a repository for thousands of years of learning—oriental wisdom, to be sure, not the enlightened liberal wisdom of the West. "Ah yes," you're saying, "but Vietnam was that exception. Let us see. In 1831, a disciple of the French Revolution, Alexis De Tocqueville, watched in Memphis, Tennessee the triumphant march of civilization across the desert, as he put it. As he watched 3,000 or 4,000 soldiers drive before them "the wandering races of the aborigines"—that is, those Native Americans who were lucky enough to escape "Jacksonian democracy" (named after a man who ordered his men to exterminate "bloodthirsty barbarians and cannibals"), Tocqueville was impressed that Americans could deprive Indians of their liberty and exterminate them, as he put it, "with singular felicity, tranquility, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood," and most importantly, I want to add, "without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of

the world"—the European world. "It was impossible," Tocqueville said, "to kill people with more respect for the laws of humanity." Fukuyama's spatial extension of the liberal principles of the French and American revolutions could not be more clearly enunciated.

The United States conquest of the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century, led by men experienced in the Indian wars, ranks as one of the most barbarous episodes of the interaction between native people and European colonizers. Six hundred thousand Filipinos perished from the war or diseases on the island of Luzon alone. William McKinley, who went on to receive a Nobel Prize, explained that "I heartily approve of the employment of the sternest measures necessary." And the director of all Presbyterian missions hailed this slaughter of Filipinos as "a great step in the civilization of the world." For Theodore Roosevelt, the murders in the Philippines were "for the civilization over the black chaos of savagery a barbarism"—again, the spatial extension of the principles of the French and American revolutions at work.

In the name of civilization and liberal democracy, the British destroyed the communal ownership of village land in India, structures which had sustained local culture for centuries, a communal tradition which survived invasions by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Afghans, Tartars, and Mongols, but which could not, as Fukuyama would insist, resist the perfection of the liberal principles of the British state. Under British enlightenment, the indigenous textile industry was driven out of business, and large estates developed quickly as peasants were turned into sharecroppers. In 1867 the first fruits of British liberalism appeared: in the Orissa district of India alone, more than one million people died in a famine. This was a famine that, I might add, was not indigenous to India, with its backward traditions (according to European values), but famine that was brought by the enlightened liberalism of European democracy, by the spatial extension of the principles of the democratic state.

Under the direct influence of its great revolution, France proclaimed a crusade against Algerian slavery and anarchy and, in the name of instituting orderly and civilized conditions, was able to break up Arab communal fields of villages, lands untouched by the barbarous and unenlightened Ottoman rulers. As long as Moslem Islamic culture had prevailed, hereditary clan and family lands were inalienable, making it impossible for the land to be sold. But after fifty years of enlightened French rule, the large estates had again appeared, and famine made its appearance in Algeria.

From the 15 million to 50 million dead of the African slave trade, to the Opium Wars, in which enlightened European powers compelled the manufacture and importation of opium in India and China, the spatial expansion of the European liberal state has meant degradation for the Third World. It has meant that the majority of humanity has, in fact, through its integration into the world economic and political system created by liberal European values, simply made poor and hungry. Of course, it is the women and children who are hardest hit in the Third World, and who are the easiest targets.

I might add here that the USSR, one of the last great European powers to finally emerge with a principled liberal democratic state (at least, we hope it will emerge with such a state) has recently joined in the chorus of nay-sayers to Third World needs. The *New York Times*, on International Women's Day, carried an article on the front page titled, "Soviet Press Snaps Back at Castro,

Painting an Outdated Police State.” Castro, of course, was standing up for the principles of communism, the leading role of the party, principles which, I think, we would not agree with; we would all support multiparty democracy. But what’s interesting here is that on International Women’s Day, Moscow news launched an attack on Fidel Castro that contained within it the following statement: “Cuban women are in no danger of replacing revolutionary consciousness with mercenary spirit as long as they are allowed a choice of one bra, or two pairs of underwear, but not both, and only the size available at the moment.”

Such trivialization of the needs of Third World peoples occurs at a time in history which, as we all know, is a time of utmost degradation for the Third World. According to the United Nations, in the 1990s it is expected that 100 million children under the age of five will die of natural causes: diarrhea, whooping cough, tetanus, pneumonia, and measles, diseases which are easily preventable through cheap vaccines or simply through clean water. Forty thousand children a day in the Third World under the age of five die of diseases that are easily preventable. This fact is not concocted; it is not a fact of which we are unaware. One billion people in the Third World are chronically malnourished, at the same time as the debt crisis-imposed austerity measures from the International Monetary Fund have resulted in a 16 percent drop in real wages in the Third World and declining gross national products. While 70 percent of the world’s wealth is in the hands of 20 percent of its population, one in ten human beings suffers starvation and malnutrition. Despite the spatial extension of liberal values in the period after World War II, there have been four times as many deaths from wars in the forty years after World War II than in the forty years prior to World War II. At the same time that the world spends \$800 billion a year on its military, one adult in three cannot read and write, one person in four is hungry, and it is estimated—a fact I would like to repeat—that 100 million children will die in the Third World in the next ten years.

The absurdity and tragedy of such a world is made even more tragic and absurd by the ignorance and lack of concern of the wealthiest planetary citizens for the continuing plight of their brothers and sisters in the Third World. As educators for peace and justice, it is incumbent upon us to address these issues, since, as we all know, there can be no real lasting peace in such a world. As long as the wretched of the earth, those at the margins of the world system, are branded as terrorists, are kept out of negotiations, have no alternative but to wage war in order to find food, there can be no lasting peace on this planet.

If we look even at the history of the disarmament movement in this country and its rally on June 12, 1982, we can see that at a time of immense optimism, immense steps forward for the peace and justice movement, speakers from the Third World were specifically excluded, or even those who had been included were told that, for lack of time, they would not be able to mount the podium. At the same time, Menachem Begin had been scheduled to come to New York the following week, and Palestinian solidarity activists had been told that there would be no time to announce demonstrations against Begin’s visit, that there was a single issue that united the million people who were to march in New York. There certainly are legitimate political disagreements that can arise in terms of the tactics of organizing broad-based coalitions. But it seems to me that there is a more compelling, a transcendental moral imperative that peace and justice educators and activists face, an imperative based upon the fact that conditions of life for the majority of humanity today are wretched.

Looking at recent events—the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall—I would like to raise the question: Is the displacement of the system's accumulation crisis, the problem of the absorption of its surplus, going to result in increased exploitation of the Third World? Will, in fact, what is called the "peace dividend" simply mean greater difficulties of coordinating the financial structures of the world economic system? Is it indeed possible that the kinds of starvation we have seen in Ethiopia prefigure a global starvation, a set of catastrophes which could, in fact, spell genocide for many native countries today?

We are not at the end of history, unless, of course, what the end of history means is what the United States and France combined to do to Vietnam—a debt we do not acknowledge, despite using more bombs than were used in all wars in history; the systematic destruction of the ecosphere through Agent Orange, bulldozers, and chemical weapons; and our promised reparations of \$3 billion, despite over 2 million deaths, a conservative number of deaths if we combine these wars. We have not offered diplomatic recognition of the new government in Vietnam, a fact that all of us should consider in terms of trying to order our agendas for the future. As peace and justice educators, we owe Vietnam a debt for helping preserve the principles of liberal democracy. It was their resistance that preserved liberty, the idea of national independence, and it was the resistance to the war, and the Watergate revelations, that helped preserve principles of individual liberty in the United States.

This dynamic of increasing political democracy in the North, producing intensified exploitation in the South, has a long history. The rationalization of the world economic system— what Fukuyama refers to as "the spatial extension of the liberal principles of democracy"—has spelled untold disaster for Third World countries in the period to come. In its present form, the liberal democratic state is predicated upon the existence of a stable consumerism in the North, in societies where the vast majority have access to more than food and shelter, to VCR's, wonderful homes, more than one car, if that is what our choice is. But is it the case that the provision of such a high material standard of living demands external sources of wealth and exploitation to supplement domestic resources spent on consumption? Despite our elation over recent events in Europe, will the result be that the First and Second Worlds form a unified economic bloc, creating the potential for a Disneyland from the west coast of California to the east coast of Siberia, while at the same time the Third World only sinks deeper into crisis?

The amount of money needed per year to solve the problems of 40,000 children a day who die is less than the daily military expenditures of the world, so that one day's moratorium on military spending could result in substantial differences to tens of thousands of people. But this is another question I want to ask: Even if we were able to resolve this particular aspect of the crisis of the world system, is it possible that the crisis would simply be displaced onto the environment, onto yet another passive victim of the active principles of the liberal democratic state? The crisis of an economic system based upon short-term profitability is a crisis that the peace and justice movement needs to address. As long as the vast social wealth remains dominated by the enlightened principle of efficiency and profit making, there will be increasing crises and unbridled expansion against the natural ecosystem. Those with money, that handful of multinational corporations that today accounts for so much of the world's production, must grow or die, at least according to the logic of enlightened liberal economics. Is it the case that only a fundamental restructuring of the world's system can lead us toward an ecologically viable

life-world, one in which we decentralize and bring under self-management the vast social wealth that today is controlled by a few hundred multinational corporations? The disarmament movement contained the potential of questioning these structures of the world's system, of asking whether or not militarism is rooted in the irrationality of the imperative of capital accumulation.

Although the disarmament movement was never able to raise this issue in a systematic fashion, it needs to be raised: that is the legacy of the disarmament movement's victory, that we need to consider how we can develop a pro-active world where peace and justice become the lasting legacy of our species.