

INSTITUTE RESOURCE PAPER #9

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM: THE CIVIL WAR IN THE UNITED STATES

WE STUDY dialectics for the same reason we study any other science. That is to help us understand our work. Since we see the struggles and problems of today as a continuation of yesterday, it is absolutely imperative that we understand history and learn to extract lessons from history. Naturally, we will use the powerful weapon of dialectics to assist us with this.

The purpose of the class is to examine history from the standpoint of dialectics. We want show how the thesis and anti thesis emerge simultaneously, how the struggle between them develops in stages and how the transformation from one quality to the next (in this case politically) is dependent upon the introduction of a new and alien element into production. Change in the economy is the basis for the introduction of new ideas into society. We want to show how these new ideas are the mobilizing force for new, transforming social action.

The application of dialectics to the study of history is called historical materialism. Historical materialism is primarily a study of the dialectical relationship between the development of the means of production and changes in society.

For example, the first law of historical materialism is that ultimately, the level of the productive forces determines the social and economic relations between people in the process of producing and distributing the necessities of life. In other words, the level of productive forces determines what forms of property are possible. Forms of property legalize the relationship between people. Communal property creates one relationship, private property another. The form of property is a political question and is resolved by struggle between various groups. A wooden plow and a hoe make slavery or serfdom possible but not inevitable. Slavery and serfdom is a political form for production. It is a productive relationship. Such productive relations are generally formed as the result of force.

Once a form of property (private, communal etc.) has been established, a complex structure of laws, courts, prisons, schools, and other institutions are formed to protect, justify and maintain that

form of property. This relationship of social institutions to property is generally referred to as "basis and superstructure." This is an important separate study in dialectics, and we cannot go deeply into it here, but it is necessary for us to understand it in our inquiry into history.

It flows from an examination of basis and superstructure that the political struggle can only be carried on in the superstructure of society. That is, the struggle is carried on against or for laws and institutions that are in their class interests. Qualitative changes in society can only take place when the basis (the form of property) is attacked and altered. This requires certain prerequisites:

1. That a new force outside the superstructure and objectively hostile to it come into being since the forces internal to the superstructure can only reform it.
2. The new force can only be created by new means of production. These new means of production are incompatible with the existing economy.

When these requisites are met, an attack against the existing productive relations becomes inevitable and transformation, generally through war begins. This session of the school is to study the application of dialectics to an important historical event. We have chosen the Civil War, because it was at that time, the greatest, bloodiest, most expensive war in history. Its legacy still dominates the thinking and politics of the country.

Any discussion of the Civil War must begin with a discussion of slavery. What were the origins of slavery? What accounts for the unprecedented brutality and pathological hatreds that arose from it?

Slavery arose as a labor system because there was no other reliable source of labor. It arose first as a system of indentured servitude and matured as a racially justified system of chattel slavery.

Slavery and the slave trade became not only the foundation of the economy of the US, it was the foundation upon which arose Europe's capitalist system. Its great naval and shipping fleets, its universities and industry was directly connected to the maintenance and expansion of slavery.

The slave system in the United States was a hybrid system. The slaves were slaves in the worst sense of the word. Their masters were bourgeois. This combination condemned the slave to the

unregulated exploitation for profit on the international market rather than previously tolerable slave systems confined to providing for the immediate wants of the master.

Because of slavery, the United States and all its institutions developed as a southern country. The Presidency, the Supreme Court and Congress were firmly in the hands of the slave owning elite. Naturally, these institutions strengthened and protected the productive relationship between slave and master. The nature of the state militia, the police patrols, the nature of the of institutions from the army to the church had but one central purpose - the defense and propagation of slavery.

As a result, the North developed as a manufacturing and shipping adjunct that serviced slavery. As long as it played this economic role, it was a staunch and militant defender of the slave system. The free black in the South had more "rights" than the free black in the North.

Massachusetts became wealthy because it dominated the slave trade. She built the ships and carried on the commerce. Small wonder that Massachusetts along with South Carolina (the largest slave holding state) held out against the abolition of slavery at the Continental Congress and made the Civil War inevitable.

The point is that so long as the central means of production was the plow and the hoe, the nation was united to defend the productive relations of slavery. The double acting steam engine was perfected and widely applied to industry by about 1832. It was an event of historic proportions. Suddenly, the manufactures were handed the stable source of power they needed to utilize all the gears and other instruments of industrial equipment that was already perfected. As manufacturing declined and industry developed, production expanded very rapidly. Soon the productive capacity of the North out ran the consuming power of the South. At that point political antagonism began to replace the former contradictions. The Southern elite imported its luxury goods from England, and much of their foodstuffs and farm implements from the North. Tariffs between England and the United States were practically unknown. Fledgling Northern industry needed protection from advanced British production in order to get on its feet. Every proposal for tariffs was blocked by the South. The North needed a government-sponsored infrastructure such as harbors and railroads. The South blocked the funding.

The turning point came with the explosive growth of the Northwest (Western Pennsylvania, Ohio,

Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota). What caused that growth and why did it tip the balance against what had become known as the "Slave power?"

A look at the map will show that large-scale migration and commerce between the east and west was almost impossible. The Allegheny Mountains were an insurmountable barrier. Therefore, all trade and migration was between north and south. Consequently, the Northwest was sparsely settled by Southerners. Since the rivers in the US run north to south, their trade was with the South. This combination made the Northwest a political reserve for the slave owners.

The construction of the Erie Canal changed all that. Suddenly the markets of New York were open to the rich farmlands of the area. Democratic-minded immigrants flooded into the Northwest. There was more money to be made trading with the east than with south. The area needed more canals, more roads and a railroad. The Southern dominated Congress, understanding the potential political danger refused to grant funds. On this basis the Northwest became a hotbed of anti-Southern and finally anti-slavery sentiment. Just as important, the rich farmlands of the Northwest wrecked the commercial farming of the Northeast. With farming and commercial slavery abolished, the Northeast turned to industry. They need expanded harbors and a tariff to assist them. Again the South, sensing the danger of an economically and hence politically independent North refused to allocate funds. Suddenly Massachusetts went from the most pro-slave to the most anti-slave state in the Union.

The economic antagonism set the stage for the introduction of new ideas. This came about with the murder of Rev. Elijah Lovejoy to stop his anti-slave propaganda. Propagandists planted the seeds in fertile soil -- the slave power is destroying the right of free speech and intends to take away the liberties of a free people. This was the actual beginning of the war.

What, then, was the Civil War? It was a struggle for political power between two antagonistic wings of the bourgeoisie. The aim of the new financial industrial oligarchy of the North was to reduce the South to a reserve of industry. The aim of the Southern elite was to transform the entire country and eventually the hemisphere into a slave empire.

Neither side intended to abolish slavery since cotton was indispensable and there was no productive force to take the place of the slave. The slaves themselves made the abolition of slavery a military,

political and moral necessity. With emancipation, the war became revolutionary and it was won.

The war ended with a pro-slavery president in office, and with all the Southern legislators who had resigned their seats showing up to legally claim them. What the South had lost on the battlefield they were about to win politically. The radical wing of the Republicans looked frantically for a way to outvote the Southern elite. They came to the conclusion that they must enfranchise the freedmen. Thus reconstruction was born.

The aim of reconstruction was, on the one hand, to politically crush the Southern elite, and, on the other hand, to contain the revolutionary forces that would be unleashed by this process.

By 1875 this was accomplished and Reconstruction came to an end. Between 1875 and 1890, the political scene was re mapped. The interests of the Southern elite merged with the financial industrial oligarchy. This was the foundation for the emergence of modern American imperialism.

Northern industry was dependent upon cotton. There was no more productive energy to take the place of the slave, so the "freedmen", along with an equal number of destitute whites were driven back to the cotton fields. Real emancipation came with the invention of a more productive way to pick cotton. This came about with the perfection of the cotton-picking machine. With the economic base in place, the modern Freedom Movement was born. The social struggle for liberation broke out, ending with the de jure equality of the Civil Rights Act.