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Maurizio Lazzarato

ADKDW Decolonial Studies Program

Translated from French by Cédric Michel
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War and Violence

I would like to address the relationship between war and violence. In my opinion, it is insufficient to speak about violence alone. The forms of violence – sexual violence, racial violence, the violence of exploitation – are a continuation of war by other means, as Clausewitz would say. However, before getting into this question, I will first have to introduce a particular type of war, that is, the war of subjugation.

One didn't have to be Lenin to understand that globalization, the monopolies, the oligopolies, and the hegemony of finance capital were going to once more drive us into an alternative between war and revolution, socialism or barbarism. War is certain, while revolution, given the state of contemporary political movements, presents itself as highly improbable.

The same situation occurred last century. The ways leading there may be different, yet the collapse of contemporary finance capital, saved by state intervention, the fragmentation and balkanization of globalization, the growing concentration of economic and political power to confront the difficulties of global finance and the global market, have produced similar results. In technical terms, war – the current war – represents a “catastrophe”;

that is, a “change of state”. We cannot predict what will happen, but what is certain is that the old world, the one we’ve known for the past fifty years, is collapsing. (In fact, it already collapsed some time ago!)

The roots of and reasons for the war in Ukraine lie in these processes and not in autocracy or the folly of a few individuals (like Putin). Everything will be decided among the great state machines, unlike what happened during the First World War when, thanks to the initiative of the Bolsheviks, revolution was established as a decisive actor in changes to the global order and in this way disrupted the plans of warring imperialisms to divide up the world. To the revolutionaries of the first half of the 20th century, capitalism was inconceivable without wars between states, without civil wars against the proletariat, without wars of conquest. This great political realism allowed them, unlike the consternation and disarray of our era, not to be taken by surprise and caught off guard by the start of the Great War.

What we lack is a class perspective on the relationship between capitalism, state, and war. It’s a matter of reconstructing it and drawing as well on the revolutionaries who, in the 20th century, waged and were subjected to war.

The War of Conquest and Subjugation

I would first like to talk about a particular kind of war, that is, the war of conquest or subjugation. Contrary to what economists, even Marxists, think, economic cycles start with wars of conquest and subjugation and end with wars between states (or revolution). This is certainly true of neoliberalism, but it was also true of classical liberalism. The former, neoliberalism, was supposed to overcome the contradictions of the latter which had led straight into the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century. Instead, however, neoliberalism followed servilely in the footsteps of its predecessor; fanning the flames of various modes of internal civil war and war between imperialisms.

In capitalism, production, whether material or immaterial, affective or desiring, cognitive or neuronal, always presupposes the extra-economic, extra-affective, extra-cognitive production of social classes. This is a point of fundamental importance: for production, there must be class; and to produce class, there must be a war of subjugation.

Before producing goods, one must take, appropriate, expropriate by state force lands, populations,

bodies, means of production, resources – and divide up what has been taken. Historically, capitalism is born of a triple conquest: the conquest of land and peasants in Europe; the conquest of women (the witch hunt is the sign of their subjugation and of the expropriation of their knowledge); and the conquest of “unoccupied lands” of the New World, the conquest of indigenous people transformed into colonized people, and Africans reduced to slaves. Without these wars aiming at the conquest of bodies, which divides conquerors and conquered into property owners and non-property owners, no production could take place. Before talking about production, we therefore have to talk about class struggle. Class struggle precedes production.

The expropriation of lands and the means of production is accompanied by the expropriation of the knowledges, sensibilities and affections of the community. The war of conquest is also a cultural apocalypse, the “end of the world” of the vanquished people. These two operations must be repeated at the beginning of each cycle of accumulation. Thus, they occur not only at the time of primitive or original accumulation, however you say it in English, but at the beginning of each cycle of accumulation. This was also the case with the neoliberal cycle, with the civil wars in Latin America.