

# Combat Nihilism: Revolutionary Optimism in the Age of U.S. Imperial Decline

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*Optimism would seem to be counter intuitive given the many crises facing millions of people in the U.S. and around the world. But optimism backed up by revolutionary thinking is just what is needed in this moment.*

Hurricane Ian. The threat of nuclear war. Inflation. Mississippi's water crisis. Any one of these developments have the potential to send even the most clear-headed individual into a state of nihilism and despair. And this is just the short list of calamities currently plaguing humanity.

Life under the decline of U.S. imperialism is far from easy. Little relief exists from the toxic stress induced by poverty, debt, racism, militarism, social isolation, and mainstream media propaganda. Exhaustion is widespread. Trust in the institutions that form the fabric of U.S. society is incredibly low. These conditions have ripened the fruit of nihilism which is growing in abundance in the United States.

In *Combat Liberalism*, Mao Zedong condemned the liberal worldview as "a corrosive which eats away unity, undermines cohesion, causes apathy and creates dissension." Liberalism generates empty and hollow faith in a system designed to exploit and oppress the masses. Anger in the establishment causes some to rise up in protest, others to seek scapegoats, and still others to internalize the pain. But in the United States, protest has been criminalized and repressed with state violence. Nihilism sprouts from liberalism's destructive seeds, breeding disappointment and despair in a social order that was always predicated on the most brutal forms of class rule.

Nihilism most often takes the form of a persistent hopelessness that accepts oppressive conditions as an unchangeable phenomenon. History, class struggle, and the heroic resistance of the people are relegated to a status worse than non-existent. Capitalist dogma becomes religion. "The news" is taken as a universal truth even if distrust in mainstream media reaches peak levels. Phrases like "it is what it is" or "there is no alternative" become etched into the consciousness of the oppressed.

The most immediate antidote to nihilism is revolutionary optimism. Revolutionary optimism isn't rooted in a blind hope that change will come at some unknown point in the future. It is cultivated by the acknowledgement that only through participation in the struggle to liberate the people can the lives of the people be transformed. Revolutionary optimism is bolstered by a deep curiosity in and knowledge of the history of class struggle. Social change is treated as a science, one with distinct properties and elements that are both inevitable and profoundly dependent upon the actions taken by the people.

Revolutionary optimism thus analyzes all phenomena from a dialectical materialist lens. Dialectical materialism observes the motion of contradictions and how their development leads to new contradictions. Imperialism lays the basis for its own destruction but won't fall on its own. Revolutionaries make the conscious decision to play a leading role in the creation of a new socialist planet but understand that the objective conditions before us present both a hinderance *and* an opportunity to build such a world. U.S. imperialism has indeed become more volatile and mired in crisis after crisis. The more that U.S. imperialism contracts economically and loses political legitimacy at home and abroad, the more repressive it becomes.

Mass incarceration, torture, austerity, privatization, surveillance, censorship, and endless war have all intensified in the last three decades since the fall of the Soviet Union to ensure that a coherent socialist movement would never arise again. This has caused the class struggle to retreat in the command center of imperialism, the United States. But even here, the emergence of mass protest movements such Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street have given birth to electoral arrangements meant to suffocate the birth of a socialist movement in its crib. The ruling class has placed a significant emphasis on repressing these movements and incorporating large sections of its participants in the Democratic Party. Bernie Sanders, AOC, and the so-called "Squad" arose from the ashes of Barack Obama's masterful service to the elite as an escape valve back into the Democratic Party's graveyard of social movements.

The dialectic is clear: masses of people are politically supportive of universal, socialist-oriented policies like Medicare for All but the Democratic Party stands in the way of building an independent mass movement toward actual socialism. The class struggle in the United States may be fractured and fragmented but the toiling masses are sitting atop a bubbling cauldron of unrest amid a number of unprecedented economic and geopolitical crises. U.S. militarism threatens nuclear conflict with both Russia and China, and the U.S. proxy war in Ukraine is rapidly accelerating in this direction. U.S. and E.U. sanctions on Russia's critical energy sector are a major catalyst in the unending spike in prices that has increased the immiseration of the working class and sent the world capitalist system on the way to its third economic crisis in fifteen years.

Under these conditions, revolutionary optimism must spring forth from the potential opportunities to organize an independent, socialist-oriented mass movement. This means first and foremost confronting the Democratic Party's stranglehold on the definition of "socialism" and "leftism" in the United States. Socialism and leftism cannot be relegated to electing Democrats out of fear of the GOP or supporting whatever reformist policy is the flavor of the day for the Democratic Party's most progressive-sounding opportunists. Socialist and leftist politics champion the capture of genuine power for the working class and the oppressed, by any means necessary. They are decidedly anti-imperialist and stand in unconditional solidarity with the oppressed nations and peoples around the world fighting for the right to determine their own destiny as enshrined by international law.

Internationally, the contradictions are more favorable for combatting the scourge of nihilism. China is fast on its way to the status of modern socialist country and leads in the world in key areas such as poverty alleviation, renewable energy, high-technology, modernized public infrastructure, and more. Russia stood up to U.S. imperialism in a major way by asserting its right to exist amid NATO military encirclement. Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, Eritrea, and several others have stood up and defended their sovereignty and social gains in the face of U.S. aggression and economic sanctions warfare. And all of the aforementioned countries, led by China and Russia, are forging deep economic, cultural, political, and military bonds in an attempt to create a multipolar world system that can overcome the challenges of unipolar U.S.-led imperialism.

Nihilism festers when the masses are forced into a state of isolation and desperation—two major consequences of the endless austerity and war waged by the U.S.-led imperialist system. To combat nihilism means to embrace revolutionary optimism. Revolutionary optimism is not merely a mindset, but a duty to fulfill our commitment to liberation of the masses from an outmoded system in decline. And it isn't simply reacting to a hope for a better future, either. Revolutionary optimism is realizable when a concrete analysis of concrete conditions leads to a higher level of consciousness that a better world is not just possible, but a process that is very much alive in the here and now.

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