

Empire of Barbarism by John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark

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"A new age of barbarism is upon us." These were the opening words of an editorial in the September 20, 2004, issue of *Business Week* clearly designed to stoke the flames of anti-terrorist hysteria. Pointing to the murder of schoolchildren in Russia, women and children killed on buses in Israel, the beheading of American, Turkish, and Nepalese workers in Iraq, and the killing of hundreds on a Spanish commuter train and hundreds more in Bali, *Business Week* declared: "America, Europe, Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, and governments everywhere are under attack by Islamic extremists. These terrorists have but one demand—the destruction of modern secular society." Western civilization was portrayed as standing in opposition to the barbarians, who desire to destroy what is assumed to be the pinnacle of social evolution.

Altogether absent from this establishment view is the predatory role played by U.S. and European imperialism. It is true that we are living in a "new age of barbarism." However this has its roots not in religious fundamentalism but in what Marx saw as the barbarism accompanying bourgeois civilization and what Rosa Luxemburg once called "the ruins of imperialistic barbarism." We need to look at global capitalism and beyond that at what the United States and Britain are doing in Iraq, the principal zone of imperialist conflict at present, if we are to plumb the full depths of the barbarism that characterizes our time.

The Concept of Barbarism

The concept of "barbarism" has a long, complex lineage within social thought in general and socialist theory in particular. The Greek word *barbaros* originally referred to anyone who didn't speak Greek. The Greeks like all ancient civilizations portrayed themselves as living at the center of the world and all others as residing in a geographical and cultural periphery (or semi-periphery). After the Greek triumph in the Persian Wars all barbarians were viewed as inferior. The distinction between superior civilized peoples at the center of the world and inferior barbarians on the periphery was thus basic to Greek and Latin thought. Plato presented a doctrine of natural slavery in which he took it for granted that it was right for Greeks either to render death unto the barbarians or to enslave them.¹

The most developed version of the distinction between barbarism and civilization introduced by the Greeks and Romans was to be found in the work of the Greek geographer Strabo (circa 64 BC–AD 24). Strabo had studied in Rome and reflected a Romanized view of the world. His seventeen volume *Geography* presented barbarism as representing an inverted world, in contrast to the Greeks and Romans, who had adopted "modes of life [production] that are civil." In his theory of barbarism and civilization the geographical difference was associated with different modes of production (*Geography*, 4.1.14). Civilized peoples lived on the most fertile soils where settled agriculture was feasible. Standing opposed to civilized, bread-eating

peoples, who were principally city-dwellers (and farmers who lived in close proximity to cities), were barbarians who were nomadic fighters living on meat and dairy and permanently under arms. Barbarians were seen as preferring force and living under circumstances where they had no recourse other than marauding and thievery since confined to wilderness and removed from arable lands.

The notion of barbarism thus took on two meanings related to two conceptions of civilization. Insofar as civilization meant city-dweller, barbarism meant non-city-dweller, and particularly those living on the periphery. Insofar as civilization stood for the rule of law and culture, barbarism stood for the lack of both and the dominance of brutality. Barbarians were known for carrying out unconventional warfare. Confronted by the organized Roman army, "the barbarians," Strabo wrote, "carried on a guerilla warfare in swamps, in pathless forests, and in deserts" (1.1.17).

Nevertheless, the key aspect dividing civilization and barbarism, according to Strabo, was the differing mode of production of each. This was principally affected by geography, with the more barbaric populations living in less fertile, more mountainous regions further north that bordered the oceans. Strabo allowed for some cultural development among barbarian populations as they learned to cultivate more civilized modes of production. In fact, he described how some barbarians were "no longer barbarians" but were "transformed to the type of the Romans" when introduced to Roman "modes of living" (production) (4.1.12). In particular, once the barbarians started producing meats and other raw materials for the Roman Empire, they were seen as more civilized.

If in Greek and Latin literature civilization versus barbarism was formed around a notion of center and periphery, early socialists, who viewed the feudalism that succeeded the Roman Empire in Western Europe as constituting a thousand years of universal barbarism, saw barbarism as a stage of development not simply confined to the periphery. For French utopian socialist Charles Fourier barbarism was the stage that preceded civilization. Barbarism was defined by force and the absolute enslavement of women. It came to its climax with the rise of large-scale slavery. Following in barbarism's wake, civilization, which he saw as typified by monogamous marriage and civil liberties for the wife and as introducing large-scale industry and the class struggle associated with it, was just as brutal in many ways as barbarism but more cunning in form. In fact, Fourier argued that civilization entailed the exploitation of the world's population and an increase in armed conflict:

Wars and revolutions devastate successively every part of the globe. Political storms, for a moment lulled, break forth anew, multiplying like the heads of the hydra beneath the blows of Hercules. Peace is but a delusion, a momentary dream, and Industry, since an island of commercial monopolists and spoliators has embarrassed the intercourse of nations, discouraged the agriculture and manufactures of two continents, and transferred their workshops into nurseries of pauperism, Industry, I say, has become the scourge of the toiling millions....The commercial spirit has opened new fields to fraud and rapine, spreading war and devastation over the two hemispheres and carrying the corruptions of Civilized cupidity even into Savage regions. Our ships circumnavigate the globe only to initiate Barbarians and Savages into our

vices, our excesses, and our crimes. Thus Civilization is becoming more and more odious as it approaches its end. The earth presents only a frightful political chaos, and invokes the arm of another Hercules to purge it from the social abominations which disgrace it (*The Social Destiny of Man, Or Theory of the Four Movements* [New York, 1857], p. 99).

The consequence of this globalizing and in a sense still barbaric mode of production was poverty and starvation for the vast majority of the world's population and the enrichment of a small segment of the people within civilized nations.

Marx and the Barbarism of Bourgeois Civilization

Marx's treatment of barbarism, while scattered in his writings, was complex and reflected the numerous contradictions embedded in civilization or capitalism in his conception, which raised the possibility of degeneration as well as progress (toward communism). He made references to barbarism both in relation to a stage of development and to issues of center-periphery. Marx also used the term "barbarism" to refer to the role of force and brutality in history and in capitalism specifically (thus referring to "the barbarism within civilization")—both at the levels of the class struggle and imperialism. In his *Ethnological Notebooks*, written at the very end of his life, he took over the concept of barbarism as a stage of human development from the work of Lewis Henry Morgan. In his *Ancient Society* Morgan identified lower barbarism with the manufacture of pottery; middle barbarism with domestication of animals in the Eastern hemisphere, irrigation and the use of adobe-brick and stone in architecture in the Western hemisphere; and upper barbarism with the manufacture of iron and the invention of the phonetic alphabet. Much of Morgan's anthropological schema, including his treatment of barbarism as a stage lying between savagery and civilization, was taken over by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. But it is Marx and Engels's more general use of the term barbarism in relation to civilization and not the specific anthropological concept later taken from Morgan that most concerns us here.

Marx saw exploitation under capitalism as frequently occurring under conditions that were barbaric, or that reflected the predatory nature of bourgeois civilization. Referring to the degradation and pollution of life that ensued with the rise of capitalism, he wrote in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: "The crudest *modes* (and *instruments*) of human labour reappear [under capitalism]; for example, the *tread-mill* used by Roman slaves has become the mode of production and mode of existence of many English workers." In his 1847 speech on *Wages* Marx metaphorically referred to the use of the treadmill in modern capitalist production (and prison systems) as a disease. "The treadmill," he observed, had reemerged "again within civilisation. Barbarism reappears, but created in the lap of civilisation itself and belonging to it; hence leprous barbarism, barbarism as leprosy of civilisation."

To understand the significance of Marx's critique it is important to recognize the role that the treadmill occupied as a means of terrorizing and torturing workers who were consigned to it for a variety of offenses. Thus in 1818 William Cubbit reintroduced English prisoners to the treadmill, which, according to a description in the October 1971 *Scientific American*, employed men in "grinding grain or in providing power for other machines. Each prisoner had to climb the treadmill a total vertical distance of

8,640 feet (2,630 meters) in six hours. The feat was the equivalent of climbing the stairs of the Washington Monument 16 times, allowing about 20 minutes for each trip.”

For Marx this reintroduction of the treadmill stood for the tortuous, life-sapping forms of exploitation frequently employed by bourgeois civilization. The treadmill was a “leprosy of civilisation” because like that disease it ate away at the body, and because leprosy, which had been prevalent in Europe during the age of medieval barbarism, served as a metaphor for the reappearance of medieval barbarism in the lap of bourgeois civilization itself. Likewise in his *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63* Marx quoted a passage from the Russian economist Heinrich Friedrich von Storch that pointed to the degradation of the working conditions and the undermining of the health of wage workers as a reflection of the regression to barbarism that frequently accompanied the growth of bourgeois civilization.

Marx also referred to barbarism in the sense of being outside of the culture of civilization, isolated from the life of the cities and from social and political intercourse. In this sense he saw the French peasantry, which played a reactionary role in supporting Bonapartism, as the class that represented “barbarism within civilization.” The periodic breakdown under capitalism of economic progress and the poverty and hardship that this entailed was itself a kind of regression, and hence Marx and Engels referred in part 1 of [The Communist Manifesto](#) to economic crisis as “a state of momentary barbarism.”²

The more global way in which Marx and Engels utilized the concept of barbarism, however, was in the treatment of the relation between center and periphery of the capitalist world economy. In their panegyric to the bourgeoisie that comprised much of part 1 of *The Communist Manifesto* they remarked how the bourgeoisie “has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.” Likewise they referred to the fact that “the cheap prices of its [the bourgeoisie’s] commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate.” Marx viewed Tsarist Russia, on the semi-periphery of Europe, as a bastion of barbarism threatening revolutionary movements in the West.

But in his critique of colonialism Marx was soon to invert his treatment of barbarism, which came to stand for what the modern bourgeois of the capitalist West “makes of himself...when he can model the world according to his own image without any interference.” “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization,” Marx wrote in 1853 in “The Future Results of the British Rule in India,” “lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.” In his later writings, Marx became ever more critical of British imperialism in India as he became aware of what Mike Davis has recently labeled “Victorian holocausts”: the coincidence of the imperialistic expropriation of the surplus of Indian society with vast famines and the imposition of starvation wages on Indian workers. (The Temple wage that the British provided for workers engaged in hard labor in Madras in India in 1877 had a caloric value that was less than what the Nazis were later to provide to workers forced to do hard labor in the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944.) Marx noted that British expansion was devastating India’s industry, spreading misery and degradation, while turning the country into simply a producer of agricultural raw materials for Britain. In fact, British imperialism served as a force of destruction, demolishing India’s productive forces

and causing underdevelopment even as it introduced the forces of modern industry into Indian society. In his treatment of “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in *Capital*, volume 1, Marx quoted approvingly from *Colonisation and Christianity* by William Howitt who had written: “The barbarities and desperate outrages of the so-called Christian race, throughout every region of the world, and upon every people they have been able to subdue, are not to be paralleled by those of any other race, however fierce, however untaught, and however reckless of mercy and of shame, in any age of the earth.”³

A common criticism of Marx’s thought is that he saw history as inherently progressive. The work that is most widely taken as reflecting this extreme progressivism is *The Communist Manifesto*. Yet, at the very beginning of the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels noted, with respect to the class struggles that had governed the history of all hitherto existing civilization, that “oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” The fall of the Roman Empire, which had succumbed to a “common ruin of the contending classes” (and barbarism both within and without) was followed in the West by a long period of medieval barbarism. Neither Marx nor Engels underestimated the role of force in history, nor its regressive influence. History could therefore move forward toward socialism or backward toward barbarism—or worse promote a more systematic, capitalist form of barbarism, naked in its imperialistic relations.

Marx’s analysis of ecological destruction wrought by capitalism—the metabolic rift—itsself pointed to the possibility of historical regression, as ruptures in the natural systems caused environmental crises for society. By robbing the soil and polluting the cities with wastes capitalism undermined the material conditions of existence. All of civilization, he pointed out, left deserts in its wake. In the same passage in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in which he referred to the reintroduction of the treadmill as a reversion to barbarism within production Marx also referred to the pollution generated in the industrial cities of Britain and the ecological destruction inflicted by capitalism: “The refinement of needs and of the means of fulfilling them gives rise to a bestial degeneration....Even the need for fresh air ceases to be a need for the worker. Man reverts once more to living in a cave, but the cave is now polluted by the mephitic and pestilential breath of civilization....Light, air, etc.—the simplest *animal* cleanliness—ceases to be a need for man. *Dirt*—this pollution and putrefaction of man, the *sewage* (this word is to be understood in its literal sense) of civilization—becomes an *element of life* for him.” Engels wrote in *The Part Played by Labor in the Transformation from Ape to Man* of the human destruction of the natural environment and the undermining of civilization that this entailed. Human beings, he noted in his ecological writings, had increased the temperature of the earth in regions where forests had been extensively destroyed. None of this was compatible with a simple progressivist vision and suggested that civilization carried a kind of reversion to barbarism within it as one potential line of evolution.⁴

Luxemburg and ‘the Ruins of Imperialistic Barbarism’

It was Rosa Luxemburg who was to promote this aspect of Marx’s dialectic in the context of global imperialist expansion, the crisis of German Social Democracy, the

First World War, and the rise of proto-fascism. In December 1918, a month before she was murdered following the defeat of the Spartacist uprising, Luxemburg wrote an article entitled "What Do the Spartacists Want?" She declared that a choice presented itself: "Socialism or barbarism." If the latter—the continuation of capitalist relations—persisted, history would entail new wars, famine, and disease. The dominant classes throughout history "all shed streams of blood, they all marched over corpses, murder, and arson, instigated civil war and treason, in order to defend their privileges and their power." The ongoing development of imperialistic barbarism promised to be more brutal and treacherous, threatening to turn much of the world "into a smoking heap of rubble."

"Socialism," Luxemburg contended, "has become necessary not merely because the proletariat is no longer willing to live under conditions imposed by the capitalist class but, rather, because if the proletariat fails to fulfill its class duties, if it fails to realize socialism, we shall crash down together in a common doom" (*The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, pp. 349–52, 364). The fate that barbarism represented was thus Marx's "common ruin of the contending classes."

In her famous *Junius Pamphlet* (*The Crisis in German Social-Democracy*), written a few years earlier while she was imprisoned for protesting the First World War, Luxemburg pointed to reactionary tendencies and the horrific possibilities of a second world war following the first that would be even more devastating in its implications. Already, capitalists were profiting from the destruction, as "cities are turned into shambles, whole countries into deserts, villages into cemeteries, whole nations into beggars." Capitalism goes forth into the world "wading in blood and dripping with filth....As a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity—[and] so it appears in all its hideous nakedness." The "triumph of imperialism" involved "the destruction of all culture, and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery." It was in this context that she referred to "the ruins of imperialistic barbarism." Socialism in contrast offered the possibility of a new world.

Luxemburg pointed especially to the destruction leveled on the periphery in Africa, the Middle East, and China—regions that had been targeted for conquest by European imperialists. "All the riches of the earth" would be subjugated to capital; and the world's population converted into wage slaves. The "civilized world," which she properly placed in quotes, had turned into the fiercest, most brutal form of barbarism the world had ever seen—armed as it was with weapons of fearsome destruction and propelled forward by an insatiable urge for economic expansion:

The "civilized world" that had stood calmly by when...imperialism doomed tens of thousands of heroes to destruction, when the desert of Kalahari shuddered with the insane cry of the thirsty and the rattling breath of the dying, when in Putumayo, within ten years, forty thousand human beings were tortured to death by a band of European industrial robber-barons, and the remnants of a whole people were beaten into cripples, when in China an ancient civilization was delivered into the hands of destruction and anarchy, with fire and slaughter, by the European soldiery, when Persia gasped in the noose of the foreign rule of force that closed inexorably about her throat, when in Tripoli the Arabs were mowed down, with fire and sword, under the yoke of capital, while their civilization and their homes were razed to the ground—this civilized world has just begun to know that the fangs of the imperialist beast

are deadly, that its breath is frightfulness, that its tearing claws have sunk deep into the breasts of its own mother, European culture. And this belated recognition is coming into the world of Europe in the distorted form of bourgeois hypocrisy, that leads each nation to recognize infamy only when it appears in the uniform of the other. They speak of German barbarism, as if every people that goes out for organized murder did not change into a horde of barbarians! They speak of Cossack horrors, as if war itself were not the greatest of all horrors (*The Crisis in German Social-Democracy*, pp. 8, 18, 124–27).

Inspired by Luxemburg's analysis, the Sri Lankan Marxist G. V. S. de Silva further developed the concept of barbarism in his book *The Alternatives: Socialism or Barbarism*. He argued that the traditional Marxist notion of modes of production evolving from capitalism to socialism to communism needed to be revised. Capitalism did not necessarily lead to socialism or socialism necessarily to communism. Rather both capitalism and socialism could degenerate into barbarism, which presented a brutal alternative to communism. Barbarism in de Silva's conception was to be defined as a society relying simultaneously on: force; ideological control on the scale of Orwell's *1984*; the destruction of all countervailing power so that economic interests can rule directly with a minimal state; "induced consumption of useless products" designed to distract the population; and the extreme domination of nature in all of its aspects. Short of a revolutionary change in the qualitative dimensions of the global economy and an end to capitalist exploitation of nature, the specter of barbarism would continue to haunt humanity. Thus, de Silva concluded ominously: "Barbarism in one or two powerful countries will overwhelm the rest of humanity."

Empire of Barbarism

Today the world is facing what de Silva feared—a barbarism emanating from a single powerful country, the United States, which has adopted a doctrine of preemptive (or preventative) war, and is threatening to destabilize the entire globe. In the late twentieth century the further growth of monopoly capital (as explained most cogently in Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* and Harry Magdoff's *Age of Imperialism*) led to a heavy reliance, particularly for the United States as the hegemonic state of the world system, on military spending and imperialist intervention. With the waning of the Cold War this dependence of the imperial superpower on the most barbaric means of advancing its interests and controlling the system has only increased. The continuing decline of U.S. economic hegemony, occurring alongside deepening economic stagnation in capitalism as a whole, has led the United States to turn increasingly to extraeconomic means of maintaining its position: putting its huge war machine in motion in order to prop up its faltering hegemony over the world economy. The "Global War on Terror" is a manifestation of this latest lethal phase of U.S. imperialism, which began with the 1991 Gulf War made possible by the breaking up of the Soviet bloc and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower.

After the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the empire could present itself as at war with barbarism and in defense of civilization. "The barbarians have already knocked at the gates," declares Niall Ferguson, Herzog Professor of History at the

Stern School of Business, New York University and a principal advocate of U.S. and British imperialism. But today's barbarians, he charges, are Islamic fundamentalists, and liberal imperialism becomes a way of inoculating the world against such Islamic terrorism. While the knock on the gates represents a clear danger to the U.S.-dominated imperial order, these external terrorist groups, Ferguson contends, will not bring about the decline of the American imperium directly. Instead, the principal threat to the position of the United States in the global economy is internal. It is rooted in an unwillingness on the part of the U.S. state to make a full claim to its position at the head of the global empire.

Ferguson, who believes that the British Empire of old should be emulated—albeit in a form worthy of the twenty-first century—argues in his latest book *Colossus* and his earlier *Empire* that the world needs an empire. Many nations would be better off dominated by the United States than having full independence. The United States, he claims, “is a guns *and* butter empire”—one that represents not just the rule of force but the advance of the principles of liberal empire and liberal bounty, thus yielding a more democratic and prosperous world order. It is no mere coincidence that Ferguson, one of the most influential establishment historians today, explicitly calls for an updating of the old “White Man’s Burden” (to be replaced by a new ideology of “functional” empire) while whitewashing one of the most barbaric wars of modern imperialism: the Philippine-American War at the beginning of the twentieth century—the very same imperial war that Kipling had urged on the United States in his poem “The White Man’s Burden” (*Colossus*, pp. 48–52, 267, 301–02; *Empire*, pp. 369–70). Ferguson’s “guns *and* butter empire” is now a transparent objective of U.S. policy. With the fall of the Soviet Union, as István Mészáros explained in *Socialism or Barbarism*, the United States began to assume “the role of the state of the capital system as such, subsuming under itself by all means at its disposal all rival powers” (p. 29). With its immense military power and its willingness to use force, the United States is now leading the world into what Mészáros has called “the potentially deadliest phase of imperialism.” In attempting to prevent revolution (or indeed any way out for populations in the periphery), the United States is seeking to transcend the only certain law of the universe: change. In the process, it has given birth to dictators, supported terrorists, and threatened the world with violent destruction. In the Middle East the United States has nurtured a regressive, fundamentalist political Islam (useful in the CIA-directed war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and in closing off all progressive options in the Middle East) that insofar as it turns back and bites the hand that fed it—the United States and its allies—is branded as a “new barbarism.”

‘The Gates of Hell Are Open’

Two years ago, Amr Moussa, head of the Arab League and former Egyptian foreign minister, predicted that “the gates of Hell” would be opened if the United States invaded Iraq. In Cairo this fall he reprised this view, observing that now “the gates of Hell are open in Iraq.” Although he was “scolded” by some for his statement two years ago, this time around, according to *USA Today* (September 16, 2004), “there was no dissent.” It is clear that the U.S. invasion and occupation has created a bloodbath in Iraq that will continue for years, given the ferocious guerrilla war that Iraqis have launched in response. The U.S. position in Iraq is deteriorating. The occupying forces have lost control over whole sections of the country. In October,

bombings occurred for the first time in the highly fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, the imperial command center in that country. Over three dozen Iraqi cities are “no-go” zones under the control of the Iraqi resistance. In the thirty days ending on September 28 there were more than 2,300 attacks by resistance forces against U.S., coalition, and Iraqi government targets in all areas of the country. “The type of attacks ran the gamut: car bombs, time bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, small-arms fire, mortar attacks and land mines.” Iraqi resistance forces launched more than 3,000 mortar attacks alone in Baghdad between April and the end of September (*New York Times*, September 29, 2004).

U.S. and British air strikes on Iraqi centers of resistance account for the preponderance of the violent deaths among the 100,000 civilians, mostly women and children, that have died so far in the war—according to a study carried out in Iraq by U.S. and British public health experts and published in the leading British medical journal (*Lancet*, online edition, October 29, 2004). Yet despite such fearsome attacks, which have targeted homes, hospitals, and mosques and unleashed untold levels of bloodshed and destruction, the Iraqi resistance seems only to be gaining in strength.

It is now well recognized by the ruling elements in the United States that the number of U.S. troops engaged in Iraq is not sufficient to accomplish the mission of subduing the population. Iraqis are reluctant to enlist in the Iraqi army and police, and those who have enlisted are deserting in droves. Lacking an internal force to conduct its bidding, the United States despite its vast, state-of-the-art military arsenal is short-handed. Working in support of U.S. occupation operations is deadly, as more than 700 Iraqi police officers aiding the occupation have been killed. On top of this, insurgents are inflicting wounds that strike at the very heart of the U.S. ruling class as oil pipelines are being targeted for destruction. The situation for the occupying forces is bleak: “The bottom line is, at this moment we are losing the war,” states Andrew Bacevich, former Army colonel and professor of international relations at Boston University. Yet, he continues, “That doesn’t mean it is lost, but we are losing” (*USA Today*, September 16, 2004). All of this has resurrected the Vietnam ghost—the seemingly inescapable symbol of U.S. defeat in imperialist wars.

Barbarism has always been associated with torture. Marx’s comments on the treadmill were aimed at the role this instrument of production played in torturing workers while reinforcing bourgeois social relations. He explored the systematic use of torture by British colonialism in India in his article “Investigations of Tortures in India” and saw the outrages of the “revolted Sepoys in India” as a “historical retribution” for such acts by their British oppressors. The systematic use of torture by the United States in Abu Ghraib in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and on its base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba is now generating throughout the world a still deeper hatred of American imperialism. In the Philippines at the beginning of the twentieth century U.S. troops employed a torture technique known as the “water cure,” in which water was pumped down the throats of the detainees and then their stomachs stepped on until they confessed—usually resulting in death shortly afterwards. One of the tortures used recently on a high-level terrorist suspect by U.S. intelligence is the infamous technique known as “water-boarding,” in which a prisoner is strapped down, forcibly pushed under water and made to believe he might drown” (*New York Times*, May 13, 2004). More standard is a set of slower but highly effective torture techniques: isolation, long-term deprivation of sleep, removal from light and sound, exposure to extreme cold and heat, forcing prisoners to remain naked, use of black

hoods, making them stand or stoop in stress positions, beatings, threatening detainees with guard dogs, twenty-four-hour interrogation, etc. According to the *Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review DoD Detention Operations* (August 2004), also known as *The Schlesinger Report* after the chair of the Independent Panel, former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, American interrogators have tortured at least five prisoners to death, and there are twenty-three other suspicious cases of detainee deaths still under investigation. Much of this was given a spurious “legal” basis by the U.S. government’s refusal to grant terror suspects detained in Guantánamo and elsewhere the status of prisoners of war, thus suspending the Geneva Convention. All of this set the stage for the barbaric treatment of prisoners.⁵

The gates of hell are open in another respect. We live in a material world, where land, water, and air support life. The human economy and natural processes are inseparably interconnected. Today all of the ecosystems on the earth are in jeopardy. Of particular concern is global warming, which is literally pointing the earth toward an inferno of our own making. The scientific consensus on global warming suggests that at least a 60–80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below the 1990 levels is necessary in the next few decades in order to avoid catastrophic environmental effects (rising sea levels leading to loss of islands and coastal areas, increasing droughts and desertification, extreme weather events, accelerated species extinction, loss of food crops, etc.) over the coming century. Yet, the United States has steadily increased its carbon dioxide emissions since 1990. It leads the world in overall emissions, with per capita emissions at over five times the world average, and shows no signs of reversing this trend, regardless of the devastating consequences this may have for other countries particularly in the tropics or for future generations. The war in Iraq, which is about the control of oil as a means to world domination, is itself a manifestation of the U.S. refusal to change direction regardless of the consequences for the planet. This “*Après moi le déluge!*” philosophy, as Marx intimated at one point, constitutes the very essence of barbarism.⁶

‘The Iraqis Will Get Tired of Getting Killed’—Rumsfeld

As *Business Week* declared “A new age of barbarism is upon us.” But it is a mistake to attribute such barbarism simply or in the main to social forces and nations in the periphery. Just as Marx came to invert the historical treatment of barbarism as he condemned the colonial systems of his day, we need to recognize the barbarism of the strong and their culpability in creating this new age. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the voice of the new barbarism, recently stated: “At some point the Iraqis will get tired of getting killed” (*USA Today*, September 16, 2004). Presumably he was referring to Iraqis killed by suicide bombers. Nevertheless, his statement remains inhuman in its implications in the context of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Once declared there is no end to “The Global War on Terror,” which ought to be called the Global War of Terror. Only the transcendence of capitalism, in the direction of socialism, offers the possibility to escape from the current state of barbarism that is paving the way to new global holocausts and a worsening ecological collapse. Daniel Singer wrote at the end of his *Whose Millennium?* “Socialism may be a historical *possibility*, or even *necessary* to eliminate the evils of capitalism, but this does not mean that it will *inevitably* take its place.” We should heed his warning. The choice

that we confront and that we will ultimately decide through our struggles is whether “socialism” or “the ruins of imperialistic barbarism” is to be the future of humankind.

Notes

1. Jona Lendering, “The Edges of the Earth in Greek and Roman Thought,” <http://www.livius.org/ea-eh/edges/edges.html>.
2. Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 360; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 6, p. 434 and vol. 34, p. 67.
3. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1976), p. 916; Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 86–8; Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), pp. 316–7 (Marx to Danielson,