ESSAY

500 Years of Decadence

Muhammad Adel Zaky

Originally published in International Affairs Forum

In the new markets, the feudal mode of production or the handicraft workshop in industry could no longer meet the growing demand. The middle-class manufacturers displaced the owners of handicraft workshops... But markets continued to expand, and demand kept increasing... The machine appeared and revolutionized industrial production. The millionaire industrialists replaced the middle-class manufacturers. Large-scale industry created the world market. The world market gave an enormous impetus to commerce, navigation, and overland transport. As industry, commerce, navigation, and railways expanded, the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background all the classes inherited from the Middle Ages...Since large-scale industry had become firmly established and the world market had been created, the bourgeoisie seized all political power in the modern representative state... Wherever the bourgeoisie gained power, it destroyed all feudal relations, whatever their character, that bound human beings to their natural superiors, leaving no other bond between one person and another than naked self-interest and the harsh obligation to pay in cash... It drowned religious fervour, chivalrous enthusiasm, and petty-bourgeois sentimentality in the icy waters of its own egotistical calculations. It turned personal dignity into exchange value and replaced the many freedoms with the single, ruthless freedom of trade...The bourgeoisie stripped every profession and occupation that had hitherto been regarded with reverence and awe of its halo of prestige and sanctity. It turned the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, and the scientist into paid wage workers... The bourgeoisie tore away the sentimental veil that had shrouded family relations and reduced them to purely financial relations...The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production and, consequently, the relations of production within society... This continual revolution in production, this perpetual disruption of all social conditions, this everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all those that preceded it... All fixed and rigid traditional social relations, together with the halo of beliefs and ideas that once surrounded them and were held sacred, are dissolved and disappear; those that replace them grow old and obsolete before they have had time to take root... All that was once traditional and stable vanishes and dissipates like smoke; all that is sacred is treated with contempt and disdain, and human beings are finally compelled to confront their actual conditions of life and their mutual relations...Driven by the constant need for new markets, the bourgeoisie spreads across the entire globe. It must establish itself everywhere, penetrate everywhere, consolidate its foundations everywhere, and forge connections everywhere... By exploiting the world market, the bourgeoisie has given production and consumption in every country a cosmopolitan character, stripping industry of its national foundations... The old national industries have been destroyed and are being destroyed every day. They are being replaced by new industries whose establishment has become a matter of vital importance for all civilized nations; industries that no longer use local raw materials, but materials drawn from

> the most remote regions, and whose products are consumed not merely within the country itself, but throughout the world... The bourgeoisie has subjected the countryside to the domination of the town. It has created enormous cities and increased the urban population to an immense degree. It has subjected so-called barbarian and semi-barbarian countries to civilized countries, peasant nations to bourgeois nations, and the East to the West...The bourgeoisie increasingly eliminates the fragmentation of the means of production, property, and population. It has concentrated populations, centralized the means of production, and accumulated property in the hands of a few individuals... During its rule, which has scarcely lasted a century, the bourgeoisie has created productive forces more numerous and colossal than all those created by all preceding generations combined." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto)

Thus did Marx and Engels summarize the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in accordance with the logic of Eurocentrism. But what can we say today, after this Eurocentric worldview has come to dominate us? To answer this question, we may ask our contemporary world two fundamental questions: What is life? And what is its purpose? Perhaps today's world alone is capable of answering these two questions! Its answer is: I do not know!

And how could it know, after five hundred years of decadence, during which it has known nothing but delirium, having stubbornly insisted on collective suicide?

The voice of life has fallen silent within us... The human conscience has grown dormant within us, until human beings have almost forgotten that they are human. Humanity has lost the genius of its upright gait, having grown accustomed to prostrating itself before tyrants; it has crawled on its belly, driven by destitution... Or it has been transformed into a Kafkaesque insect...

Kafka's insect is a magnificent embodiment of a world whose human being staggers, now that life has become devoid of meaning and purpose, and bereft of any civilizational project capable of securing a safe future.

How can our world today know the meaning of life and its purpose? Dante paved the way for it when he historically separated life from religion, following the logic of the sacred Aristotle. Descartes then reduced the human being to a thinking machine. Feelings... sensations... emotions... all became mental processes subject, with technological advancement, to precise measurement by the latest Microsoft programs, and even calculable according to the global exchange rate!

How can our world today know the meaning of life and its purpose? Nietzsche had already declared to it that it was human beings themselves who established good and evil and invented them; they neither discovered them nor had they been sent down to them from heaven!

Beginning with meaninglessness, atheism became an act of creation, and religion a myth. Prophets became mercenaries. Even atheism itself turned into a monstrosity... Beginning with meaninglessness, Faust cursed everything good on earth and followed Marguerite!

Beginning with meaninglessness and purposelessness, detachment from human civilization became modernity, abandonment of our common human heritage became renewal, while the unity of human knowledge came to be regarded as a myth!

How can our world today know the meaning of life and its purpose, when the Barber of Seville had whispered to it:

> "Gold has the power to sharpen human understanding."

How exquisitely polite this statement sounds, compared with what Columbus proclaimed in Jamaica:

> "Gold is a wonderful thing. Whoever possesses it is master of everything he desires. With gold, one can even gain entry for souls into Paradise."

Beginning with meaninglessness, intellectual frenzy became amusement in hard rock, metal, techno, and funk music. Emptiness became experimentation; the destruction of meaning and colour became Impressionism; the abandonment of form and dimensions became Cubism; and reduction and flattening were given the name of abstraction.

And with meaninglessness, we were made to swallow the bitterness of the legacy of positive religion... a legacy that stripped creative texts of their power to question the meaning of our lives and their purpose. For the stripping of those texts of that very power took place at precisely the moment when they were transformed from icons into idols... from points of departure into terminal destinations, beyond which whoever ventured became an apostate!

Let us take one further intellectual step in order to gain an immediate understanding of our real world by identifying its defining features, which reveal a collective consensus... but a consensus on suicide. This planet, with everything and everyone upon it, is rushing headlong into the depths, the depths of decadence... It is the death throes: the death of an age and the birth of another! But must we be crushed beneath the wheels of its inexorability?

Anyone who finds my words unpalatable need only look at the emptiness of art; the decay and disintegration of morality; the corruption and chaos of the economy; the repression and oppression of politics; the merchants of religion... Let them look at the disintegration of collective desire... and the resurgence of individualism and selfishness. Let them look at the monopoly of knowledge, theocracy in faith, fanaticism in religion, and idolatry in opinion... Let them look at the pretension to possess the social truth! Let them look at wars... genocides... massacres... the erasure of civilizations and the removal of cultures from the map of the world!

Indeed, this is the world produced by the past 500 years. It is the world that has begun chanting the hymns of its own destruction at the altar of the most ruthless god: contemporary capitalism. It does so under the leadership of the high priest of its temple: the market economy. In a collective hysteria, the servants of the altar, adorned with

dollars, have released funeral incense after reciting passages from the Book of Decadence in the temples of Wall Street and its branches in Tokyo, Berlin, New York, and Paris!

Here they are: the returning Greek gods, now reborn in an Indian guise. The God of the Market. The God of Capitalism. The God of Imperialism. Three in One (Amen!). They are one insatiable god, thirsting for ever more of the blood of peoples, mingled with banknotes in the vaults of the death-bearing “Fund,” which carries the throne of the world's masters and corrupters, its instigators of discord and its executioners. America, the vanguard of decadence, and the servants of its temples!

GATT... the World Bank... the International Monetary Fund: three elements in a single organic compound. Poisonous... it spreads slowly and relentlessly, penetrating every cell of the economy of our world, and leaving none until it is drenched in blood... This is the compound whose venom is swallowed by everyone who believes in the doctrine of monotheism: the unity of the benevolent market, distributed with justice! And who follows the supreme high priest the one and only market economy!

The debt crisis... the energy crisis... the monetary crisis: these are the offerings laid upon the dollar altar, the sacrificial victim of the capitalist feast, known as the cyclical crisis!

Unemployment... hunger... poverty... recession... bankruptcy: these are the mighty gods of destruction dwelling in the heavens of a world that has desecrated the “hand”—the human hand, thanks to which humanity separated itself from the animal kingdom. These are the inevitable consequences of worshipping the idol of circulation, in the hope of drawing closer to profits, after overthrowing the truly sacred texts which declare that profits are not born of a virgin. They are formed in the sphere of production, not circulation, through the interaction of labour power with the means of production.

Price is the monetary form assumed by value in exchange; it does not follow, therefore, that price must be a truthful expression of value. In one of its manifestations, the crisis appears as a rupture between value and price at the first level; it also appears in price itself at the first level, repeated. These, then, are the natural consequences of the monstrous distortion of the science of political economy. They are the elementary consequences of the supremacy of a single culture and the domination of a singular civilization, both of which can do nothing but manufacture a coffin... while the world exhales its final breaths within it!

Underdevelopment... development. These are two terms that can only be understood through the explanations offered by the priests of international institutions of human extermination. For the Book of Decadence has decreed that underdevelopment means living in disobedience to the Lord of the Market, an apostate from its law, inscribed in the sacred annexes of GATT. Development means loving Him and dissolving into Him... Underdevelopment is fleeing destruction, whereas rushing headlong towards it is what development means... A development whose entrails are filled with ever more victims of unemployment, hunger, poverty, and disease...

Indeed, 500 years of decadence, during which madmen led the blind on the back of a planet bent on suicide!

Let us take yet another intellectual step, bringing us closer to witnessing today's world as it stands helpless before the two fundamental questions: What is life? And what is its purpose?

> The combined wealth of the world's three richest individuals is equivalent to the gross domestic product of the 48 poorest countries. Moreover, the wealth of the world's 200 richest individuals exceeds the combined income of 41% of the world's population. Studies indicate that a contribution of just 1% of their wealth would be sufficient to cover the cost of primary education for all children in the underdeveloped regions!
>
> 85 percent of the world's population lives in the underdeveloped regions of the contemporary capitalist system!
>
> In 2010, the average per capita share of gross national product in the underdeveloped regions amounted to approximately $2,140 annually, compared with $57,593 annually in the developed regions!
>
> Ten percent of hildren in Tanzania die during their first year of life, while that country's national income is close to half of what Americans spend on wallpaper.
>
> Nearly one billion people worldwide live on less than one dollar a day, and an equal number suffer from malnutrition!
>
> Seventy million children of primary-school age in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school, while more than ten million children die every year before reaching their fifth birthday!
>
> Seventy-six percent of the world's population lives in poor countries, while 8% live in middle-income countries and 16% in wealthy countries!
>
> The poor account for 78% of the world's population, while the middle class accounts for 11%, and the wealthy for the remaining 11%!
>
> More than one billion people around the world lack access to a source of clean, safe drinking water, the vast majority of them living in rural areas!
>
> In the underdeveloped regions, 33.3% of the population lack safe or treated drinking water suitable for consumption and everyday use; 25% lack adequate housing; 20% lack even the most basic routine healthcare services; 20% of children do not progress beyond the fifth grade of primary school; and 20% of students suffer from malnutrition and inadequate food intake!
>
> The industrialised countries possess 97% of all global concessions, while transnational corporations control 90% of technological, production, and marketing concessions. More than 80% of the total profits generated by foreign direct investment in the underdeveloped regions flow to just 20 countries belonging to the developed regions of the global capitalist system!
>
> While 35,000 children die every day from hunger and disease, and one-fifth of the population of underdeveloped countries today goes to bed starving, the aid allocated to

poor countries through the United Nations amounts to less than what nine developed countries spend on food for cats and dogs!

One billion people around the world suffer from hunger, most of them children in Africa and Asia!

The risk faced by a pregnant woman in the Global South is 300 times greater than that faced by a pregnant woman in the Global North!

Twenty percent of the world's population controls 80% of its natural resources.

One percent of the Earth's population owns half the world's wealth!

The personal wealth of the 62 richest billionaires is equivalent to the combined wealth of more than 3.5 billion human beings! The overwhelming majority of maternal deaths occur in underdeveloped countries. Half of them (265,000) occur in sub-Saharan Africa, while another third (187,000) occur in South Asia. Together, these two regions account for 85% of all pregnancy- and childbirth-related deaths worldwide. India alone accounts for approximately 22% of the global total. According to UNICEF, neonatal mortality rates reach 45% in West and Central Africa and

approximately 40% in sub-Saharan Africa, whereas they do not exceed 2% in Western European countries Twenty percent of the world's population controls 82.7% of global output, 81.2% of world trade, 96.6% of commercial loans, 80.6% of savings, and

80.5% of investments! There is one doctor for every 647 people in Switzerland (a population of 8 million); one doctor for every 57,300 people in Burkina Faso (a population

of 17 million); and one doctor for every 82,000 people in Niger (a population of 18 million)! In Nigeria, whose population stands at approximately 175 million, 70% of the population lives on less than one dollar a day. Poverty in rural Nigeria is estimated at approximately 64%, nearly one and a half times the urban rate. Moreover, the poverty rate in the north-eastern region stands at 67%,

almost twice the poverty level of 34% in the south-east, the more prosperous region!

Hunger causes the deaths of more than 18 million people worldwide every year!

800 million people go to bed hungry every day!

800 million people have no access to healthcare services!

Hunger and malnutrition claim the lives of six million children every year! Approximately 850 million people suffer from malnutrition in different parts of the world. In general, official figures confirm that, for every person

worldwide who does not suffer from chronic undernourishment, there are nine who do! In the underdeveloped regions, malaria has been responsible for the deaths of approximately 530,000 women during pregnancy and childbirth, 300

million cases of infection, and more than one million deaths! The number of victims of human trafficking is increasing day by day. In 2012, the International Labour Organization estimated that approximately 20.9 million people had fallen victim to forced labour and sexual exploitation. More recently, the Walk Free Foundation published its

new estimates of modern slavery, based on 2014 figures, putting the number of people subjected to enslavement at 35.8 million. The International Labour Organization also estimates that the illicit profits generated by forced labour amount to US$150 billion annually (2014 figures). These profits reach their highest levels in Asia, where they were estimated at approximately US$52 billion. In advanced economies outside Asia, they amounted to approximately

US$47 billion. Bouvier described the development of the art “market” according to American specifications as follows: “Ignorance in painting has been established as a principle; the more ignorant the artist, the more they regard him as a pioneer. It is no longer important to study or to paint. All that matters is to search for new things, whatever they may be, even paintings made from human excrement, since the criterion has become financial rather than

aesthetic.” American consumerist theory, saturated with the laws of the market, has entered the world of art and laid down the rules governing the art market. Its sole criterion is strangeness: attracting pretentious buyers and introducing wastefulness into the art market. This is precisely what one dealer expressed: “The American approach must be introduced, by any means necessary. In the world of works of art, things become backward once they grow old. We must teach collectors and purchasers of paintings to throw a painting into the rubbish bin once it becomes old, just as they would a car o

a refrigerator, when new paintings arrive to take its place.” n 1991, the renowned Christie's auction house sold a painting by De Kooning, one of the celebrated artists promoted through the media, alongside

Versace, Calvin Klein, Armani, and others, in order to corrupt global taste, for approximately one hundred million dollars! Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the widespread expansion of prostitution, a study was conducted among fifteen-year-old Russian schoolgirls. Seventy per cent of them expressed a desire to become prostitutes, whereas just ten years earlier they had aspired to become astronauts,

doctors, and teachers!

The global value of prostitution in 2010 was estimated at the equivalent of US$175 billion! Israel is among the world's largest suppliers of “Slavic” prostitutes. According to estimates from several sources, the number of Israeli men who make use of their services reaches one million every month. According to the findings of the Israeli parliamentary commission of inquiry, approximately 3,000 to 5,000 women from the former Soviet Union are brought to Israel every year and sold into prostitution... These women work seven days a week, for as many as eighteen hours a day, and receive only 20 shekels (equivalent to US$4.50) out of the 120 shekels (US$27) paid by each client.

They are trafficked for sums ranging from US$8,000 to US$10,000 per woman! Those who proclaim themselves defenders of “human rights” around the world, and who constantly gather to combat terrorism, are the very people who have toasted terrorism in cups made from human skulls, becoming so intoxicated that they have trampled upon everything sacred! In truth, they are the heads of states most responsible for terrorism throughout the history of the world and in the present day; they are the most atrocious violators of human rights.

Their distant past alone provides ample evidence: the extermination of the Native Americans, the enslavement of Black people, the waging of wars, and the colonisation of countries and continents. Yet their crimes continue. Consider the American atrocities in Vietnam, where napalm was used on a massive scale. Nor is it long ago that the defenceless and wretched Afghan people were pounded with tons of bombs!

They are also responsible for the deaths of more than 250,000 children under the age of five, in hospitals and elsewhere, through their insistence on imposing the blockade on Iraq, and now for setting the country ablaze with discord and leaving it, should that come to pass, in ruins.

History will also remember the experts in torture and extermination in Rwanda, whose actions resulted in 400,000 deaths. It will remember, too, the supply of arms to dictatorial governments and the financing of those governments, all in the name of “preserving peace and achieving security and stability!”—thos noble objectives realised upon the ruins of peoples: millions dead and millions wounded!

They are the ones who supported the Guatemalan butcher Gramajo, the South Korean tyrant Chun, and the Zairian agent Mobutu Sese Seko. They are the ones who installed Chamorro in the presidency of Nicaragua, overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran, Sukarno in Indonesia, and Aristide in Haiti! They are also the ones who orchestrated the Rios Montt massacre on the Salvadoran-Honduran border!

They are the very same people who went to Afghanistan and set the war ablaze in order to gain control over the opium markets and dominate its production They are the ones wreaking havoc in Syria, fighting over the Balkans, draining the resources of the Gulf monarchies, slaughtering children in Gaza, fomenting discord in Venezuela and Iraq! They are the ones stealing Africa's gold mines and squandering the resources of the peoples of Latin America. They manufacture terrorism and support terrorists. They are the princes of terror!

This is the world of today. What we have mentioned represents only a small fraction of what could be added at will. All one need do is take up any one of the thousands of reports regularly issued by international organisations and institutions concerned with hunger, poverty, and disease. One will be astonished by the extent to which official theory ignores these reports, and will become convinced that this world, in its present condition and under its present social, economic, and political system, is utterly incapable of advancing an answer to the questions: What is life? And what is its purpose? The wound is still bleeding. And still, as Galeano sang, the veins remain open!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muhammad Adel Zaky is an Egyptian researcher specializing in the history of economic thought. He is the author of Critique of Political Economy, a book that has gone through six editions. His research explores the evolution of economic ideas in relation to social and historical change.