

81-7.99

Can the Ruling Class Shape History?

Paul Sweezy

Originally entitled "Vietnam: Endless War", this article was the Review of the Month in the April 1969 issue of Monthly Review.

Paul Sweezy, one of the world's leading marxist economists, founded Monthly Review with Leo Huberman (1903-1968) in 1949. He has been a co-editor of MR since then, first with Huberman and now with Harry Magdoff.

published by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont St.
Boston, Mass. 02118

VIETNAM: ENDLESS WAR

A report from Washington in the *New York Times* of March 8 states:

A State Department official who recently returned from speaking engagements at a number of universities was amazed that the students, who only six months ago were lambasting Washington for its Vietnam policy, hardly brought the subject up. Public pressure over the war has almost disappeared.

This surely remarkable state of affairs has obviously not been brought about because the fighting has stopped or even, on the average, greatly diminished. Casualties have been consistently over 200 Americans killed every week, and as we write in early March they are running around twice that figure. Nor is there any reason to believe that the reason is that people generally, and those who were previously such vocal protesters against the war in particular, have suddenly become convinced that the war is any more deserving of their support than it was a year ago. In this respect absolutely nothing has changed. What then is the reason?

Evidently that the American public, including most of the Left, expects that the Paris talks are really going to lead to a negotiated settlement in the reasonably near future.

The basis of this expectation is not the same for everyone. Probably a majority of the people believe what the government tells them, that it is earnestly seeking peace and that the military situation is such that the other side has no choice but to accept what Washington calls an "honorable" settlement. On this interpretation, the dragging out of the negotiations is due to the Communists' hope of winning at Paris what they have not been able to win on the battlefield. When they are convinced

that this is impossible, they will be ready for an acceptable compromise.

Very few people on the Left, however, can base their expectation of an early end to the war on such grounds. The Left has learned to distrust just about everything the government says about Vietnam; for the most part it knows that what Washington has all along called an "honorable" peace means the maintenance of a neocolonial puppet regime in South Vietnam; and it also knows that it is precisely this noncompromisable issue of neocolonialism versus national liberation which has been at the heart of the struggle from the very beginning. On what, then, does the Left base its expectation of an early end?

The answer seems to be that the Left, or at any rate that part of it which until recently constituted the core of the anti-war movement, is convinced of two things: (1) that the continuation of the war is causing increasingly serious damage to the vital interests of the U.S. ruling class, undermining the international position of the dollar, and squandering resources which might be used to allay the country's mounting racial and urban crises; and (2) that the ruling class always bases its policies and actions on a rational calculation of what best serves its vital interests. *Ergo* the ruling class must want to end the war soon and can be expected to do so even though the price has to be withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam. A good statement of this position is given in Richard Du Boff's generally excellent review of Juan Bosch's latest book, printed elsewhere in this issue of MR (p. 25 below):

The elders of the system . . . have clearly had enough. Wall Street, the multinational corporations, the foundation technocrats, the major news media, the international bankers all understand that the Vietnam intervention was essentially "correct," but that the tenacity of Vietnamese resistance was disastrously underestimated. The military and its civilian spokesmen sold them a bill of goods, and its cost has become unbearably high. The enterprise has got to be liquidated—and it probably will be.

The first difficulty with this theory is that it was just as applicable a year ago as it is now, and as a matter of fact it was freely used by leftists to explain Johnson's speech of March 31,

1968, curtailing the bombing of North Vietnam and offering to open peace talks. We were told then, too, that the ruling class had had enough and was about to throw in the towel. However, it must be recognized that a theory of this sort is not necessarily disproved by a lack of confirmation in a period as short as a year; its advocates can and do point to a variety of factors which may have contributed to the postponement of the expected action, and it is impossible to demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that some combination of these factors has not in fact played the role assigned to it. Those of us who believe the theory is wrong—and have so believed right along—must go beyond pointing out that it hasn't worked that way to an attack on the theory itself.

To begin with, we do not disagree with what was designated above as the first element of the theory in question: continuation of the war *is* causing increasingly serious damage to the vital interests of the U.S. ruling class. What is *not* correct is that the ruling class—in this country today or in any other country at any other time—always bases its policies on a rational calculation of what best serves its vital interests.

What are involved here are issues of great complexity which unfortunately have been sadly neglected by the social sciences. We have a plethora of studies of the *composition* of various ruling classes, but few if any studies of the determinants and dynamics of the *behavior* of ruling classes. In these circumstances there has been a strong tendency to substitute formulas and myths for knowledge and analysis. The ruling class is frequently treated as though it were a person, endowed in the same way with a mind and will of its own. Or it is assumed to have an all-powerful directorate which meets in secret to manipulate the levers of power. C. Wright Mills's theory of the "power elite," though seemingly more sophisticated, in reality is very similar in reducing class behavior to the behavior of a specified group of individuals. Once this reduction has been made, by whatever means, all that we know or think we know about how and why individuals act can be brought to bear on the problem of class behavior. And the result is quite likely to be all wrong.

This is not because classes do not act through individuals: of course they do. The error lies in assuming that people think and act the same way in their capacity as members of a class as they do in their capacity as private individuals. It is easy to show that this is not so. Take, for example, the question of a resort to violence. People who in their private lives would be horrified at the idea of killing another human being have no hesitation in advocating and participating in mass murder when they believe it to be in the national (i.e. ruling-class) interest. Nor is the method of conceiving interests and their relative importance the same in private as it is in class matters. Many illustrations of the kind of differences we have in mind could be given, but it hardly seems necessary in the present context. The single fact that people can simultaneously condemn murder and condone war is by itself enough to prove the necessity of a theory of class behavior quite separate from any theory or theories of individual behavior.

This is naturally not the place to try to present a theory of class behavior, but we do need to call attention to certain factors which would certainly enter into such a theory and without which it is impossible to understand the attitudes and policies of the U.S. ruling class toward Vietnam.

First, every ruling class *necessarily* generates an ideology—in the specific sense of an ensemble of ideas and morals and rationalizations—which serves to justify and legitimize its privileges and power. Much of this ideology is what Engels seems to have been the first to call “false consciousness”: it misrepresents or distorts reality in order to convince exploited classes and peoples of the justice and inevitability of their fate. But, and this is the decisive point from our present angle of vision, it also and equally necessarily impairs the ability of the ruling class in question (and its assorted educators and publicists) to understand the historical situation in which it has its being.

Second, the fact that it does have its being in a given historical context means that the policies it devises and the actions it takes to protect and promote its interests depend in a crucially important way on its necessarily faulty interpretation of the dominant historical forces and trends of its epoch.

If the foregoing propositions are accepted, it follows that it can only be misleading to suppose that a ruling class can, still less that it actually does, base its actions on a rational calculation of what is likely to serve its interests most effectively—in the manner, say, of a businessman deciding on the basis of cost and market data whether or not to bring out a new line of products.

This is not to imply that a ruling class is ignorant of its interests. Its highest and, in case of conflict, overriding interest is preservation of the system in which its power and privileges are rooted; and in the case of most ruling classes scarcely lower priority is accorded to the expansion of that system. What we are saying is that pursuit of these goals involves dealing not with measurable data such as costs and prices and profits but rather with historic forces and trends which can never be traced and foreseen, even by the best of analysts, except within fairly wide limits, and which are bound to be interpreted by ruling classes with varying degrees of ideological error. It is therefore entirely wrong to assume that ruling-class policies are formulated on the basis of a rational and reliable comprehension of the realities of a given situation. The truth is that these policies can be understood and anticipated only through analyzing and making full allowance for the elements of error and irrationality which enter into them.

There are two further factors which have to be taken into account in dealing with ruling-class behavior. The first is the tremendous importance of what may be called momentum. When a certain decision is taken and a corresponding course of action is embarked upon, it may at first be done in a tentative and readily reversible way. But the longer it is persisted in and the wider and deeper the commitments which come to be involved, the harder it is to call a halt or turn aside. The second factor is the familiar one of "face." Ruling classes by definition are concerned with power, and power is a complicated phenomenon. It certainly does, in Chairman Mao's words, grow out of the barrel of a gun, but its extent and durability are affected by other factors, such as ability to satisfy people's needs, to overawe them, to command their admiration or respect. And in this

complex, face—itself a mixture of success, credibility, and dignity—plays a significant part. The bigger a miscalculation and the more dire its threatened consequences, the greater is the motivation for a ruling class to try to recoup rather than admit it was wrong. In some circumstances, to be sure, the reason for wanting to save face may be merely false pride; but this is by no means always the case: the loss of face stemming from a serious defeat can dangerously undermine the power of a ruling class.

Before considering the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the light of these observations on factors entering into the determination of ruling-class behavior, we want to emphasize a point which is perhaps obvious enough but which nevertheless is too often overlooked or neglected: History is full of examples of ruling classes which have failed to find their way out of crises and have consequently suffered terrible, and often fatal, disasters. And in many cases—perhaps even in all cases—there were prominent members of the doomed class who could clearly read the handwriting on the wall and yet were either unwilling or unable to intervene to alter the course of events. Only think of Germany in the first half of the twentieth century! Twice within a period of twenty-five years the German ruling class embarked on a career of unbridled conquest and expansion, and twice it suffered total defeat. Nor is it only hindsight that enables us to say that both efforts were foredoomed. What the British historian A. J. P. Taylor says about the first would be equally applicable to the second:

There existed in Germany in the First World War forces which repudiated [the] program of conquest and sought an alternative. The first of these forces came from all those members of the "governing classes"—intelligent industrialists, skeptical generals, rigid Junkers, competent bureaucrats, [the Chancellor] himself—who believed that Germany could not win the war; but as a peace without victory raised even more terrifying problems than endless war, their opposition counted for nothing. They regretted, they lamented, they complained; but they acquiesced in every step taken to achieve a world conquest which they believed impossible.*

* A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History*, Putnam's, 1962, p. 192.

Let us turn now to the problem of the U.S. ruling class's Vietnam policy. The original involvement, in the late 1940's and early 1950's, was ostensibly to help the French reassert control over their prewar Indo-Chinese colony, but its real long-run purpose was undoubtedly to enable the Americans to replace the French as overlords in that part of the world. After the French defeat and withdrawal in 1954, the U.S. decided to settle for a Korea-type division of Vietnam, installing a neo-colonial puppet regime in Saigon and contemptuously flouting the Geneva accords which had brought the fighting to an end. This decision and the subsequent efforts to make it stick were unquestionably based upon an ideologically conditioned failure to understand the historical realities of the Vietnamese situation. The Vietnamese were thought of as inferior "natives" who would either be overawed by U.S. power or welcome its protection. The revolutionary aspect of the resistance to French rule was merely the local manifestation of the world Communist conspiracy with headquarters in Moscow (later moved to Peking). Because of these and related misconceptions, the U.S. ruling class figured that it would be easy to establish and maintain in South Vietnam a strategically located center of American imperial interests for all Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

Later the character of the involvement changed. The puppet regime degenerated and by the second half of 1964 was on the verge of collapse. Faced with the choice of getting out of Vietnam altogether or Americanizing the war, Washington took the second course. Once again, ideologically conditioned miscalculations came into play: surely American soldiers with their enormously superior equipment and firepower would be able to finish off the raggle-taggle guerrillas in short order.

That was four years ago, and the guerrillas are militarily and politically stronger than ever. On the U.S. side a process of disillusionment, the beginnings of which can be traced back to even before the Americanization of the war, has already gone far: the elders of the system, as Du Boff rightly points out in the review referred to on page 2 above, have indeed had enough and would dearly love to liquidate the whole enterprise.

But by now the factors of momentum and face, both of which militate against any settlement which would exclude the American presence in South Vietnam, have acquired formidable dimensions.

The thing about the momentum factor which is most interesting is that it rests in large part on interests which have been created and blown up by and in the course of U.S. intervention itself. It has frequently been pointed out by critics of the thesis that the war in Vietnam has imperialist motives and aims that when the United States got involved American business had almost no interests in that country or the surrounding area. That was true fifteen years ago, but it is no longer true today. Many U.S. corporations and consortia of corporations have moved into South Vietnam, including the two biggest U.S. banks,* some of the country's largest construction firms, etc. And during the same years, U.S. business and finance have invaded and spread throughout the entire area from Thailand on the northwest to Australia and New Zealand on the southeast. But vested interests in the Vietnam war are by no means confined to Vietnam and the surrounding region: after all, most of the \$30 billion added to the country's military budget as a direct consequence of the war is spent in the United States and nourishes in greater or lesser degree most of the country's military-industrial complex. Add to these facts that many states and congressional districts are economically and politically tied up with Vietnam-connected largesse and that an enormous bureaucracy both in the Pentagon and in various civilian government agencies is geared to the war's continuation—add all this up and you can begin to appreciate the fantastic momentum which now weighs against any drastic shifts in ruling-class policy toward Vietnam.

The factor of face is perhaps even more important. In 1954 it would have been relatively easy for the United States to write Vietnam off, just as China had been written off as lost by the Truman administration in 1949. But from then on it has become progressively more difficult. The Saigon regime became

* See Harry Magdoff, "The Age of Imperialism," Part II, MR, October, 1968, pp. 18-19.

a U.S. puppet and as such was the recipient of all kinds of open and implied promises of aid and protection: any failure to keep these promises could not but contribute to undermining the relations between the United States and literally dozens of puppets and clients all over the globe. Still it might have been possible to wriggle out as long as the U.S. military posture in South Vietnam was that of adviser and helper: it could have been claimed, quite correctly, that the South Vietnam regime had shown itself incapable of using U.S. advice and aid effectively and that this released the United States from all further obligations. But once the war had been Americanized the whole problem underwent a qualitative change. It was no longer a weak and shaky government of a backward half-country against the Communists but the mighty, all-powerful United States of America against the armed forces of a country with about 15 percent of the U.S. population and an infinitesimal percentage of the per capita income. For the United States to admit defeat under these circumstances—and we should be clear that withdrawal from Vietnam would be precisely that—would entail a loss of face on a scale the world has probably never seen before. The Chinese contention that the United States is a paper tiger would be proved to the hilt, and every radical and revolutionary movement around the world would be encouraged to believe that what had been accomplished in Vietnam could, sooner or later, be duplicated everywhere else. Much as the elders might want to liquidate the war, they could only contemplate consequences of this sort with extreme misgivings and consternation.

We seem to have reached a situation now comparable to that in Germany during the First World War described in the above quotation from A. J. P. Taylor: as for the dissenting Germans of that time, so for our unhappy elders of today “a peace without victory raises even more terrifying problems than endless war.” Only, for our elders matters are even worse, the alternative to endless war being not peace without victory but defeat. No wonder they opt for endless war.

And, make no mistake, endless war is the right name for the policy of the U.S. government today, as it has been for

the past year. The issues in the "great debate" which took place behind the scenes in Washington during the month of March 1968—described in detail in two long stories in the *New York Times* of March 6 and 7—were not war or peace: they were escalation or continuation of the war at roughly the current level. And the decision went against escalation (and against the Pentagon) because the elders saw the prospects of success as dim and the costs in terms of vital ruling-class interests as prohibitive. But so far as we know, there is not a shred of evidence—certainly not in the *New York Times* stories—that anyone with access to the levers of power has at any time favored ending the war in Vietnam on the only terms it can be ended. Neither escalation nor withdrawal: this is a formula for endless war.

Not that endless war will really be endless in Vietnam any more than it was in Europe a half century earlier. It may therefore be useful to recall what it was that finally brought Germany to the end of her rope: military defeat at the front and rebellion in the rear.

We believe that it will be these same forces—and not costs or casualties or threats to the dollar—which will bring an end to the war in Vietnam. If we are right, the implications for the antiwar movement, and especially for the Left within the antiwar movement, are both obvious and profound.

(March 10, 1969)

I would like to subscribe to

MONTHLY REVIEW

☐ 1 year \$7 (foreign \$8) 60s. ☐ 2 years \$12 (foreign \$14) 100s.

Special sub rates to students: \$5 (foreign \$6) 45s.

Monthly Review Press
116 West 14th Street
New York, N. Y. 10011

Monthly Review Press
33/37 Moreland Street
London, E.C. 1, England

I enclose \$.....

I enclose £.....

Please send me MONTHLY REVIEW for

☐ one year

☐ two years

Name

Address

(Canadian readers: if you pay in Canadian currency,
please add 10 percent.)



Write for a free sample of the current issue.