

## US Cultural Traditions and its Decline as an Empire

For a ruling class, the loss of its power and wealth, and world domination is never an easy thing. And since in all but the most unusual of circumstances the working class to some degree or another identifies with “its” ruling class, it is not easy for the working class either. What was true for empires from the Roman down through the British is so with a vengeance for the US Empire and US society.

It may seem puzzling to socialists and workers throughout the world why it is that a mass uprising of the US working class has not yet developed.

The US working class has a long and explosive tradition of class struggle. In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was somewhat muzzled by official anti-communism and following the collapse of Stalinism by the “free” market propaganda. These factors, as well as others, helped the union officialdom partially hold down the resistance of US workers to attacks by the capitalist class. It is nearly inevitable that a mass resistance will ultimately develop, but meanwhile it is useful to consider some of the traditions of US culture that have also added to the existing confusion here.

Various such traditions have been used to somewhat mask the class divide and to hide the fact that the interests of US workers are linked those of workers throughout the world. This is the same as saying that important aspects of US culture discourage a scientific view of human history, including the history of the United States itself.

### Religion

An important aspect is the central role of religious revivalism in the US. As the perceptive capitalist commentator Kevin Phillips wrote (in *American Theocracy*), “the role of religion in American politics and war (can be described) with two words: *widely underestimated*.”

Because of how US society developed, without any struggle over ideas between a rising capitalist class and a feudal class, pragmatism and an underestimation of the importance of ideas has always been central to the culture. But from the time that the first pilgrims landed, religion was also central, and one religious mania after another swept society.

In recent years, that religious mania has increased.

Today, some 55% of people here say they believe that the Bible is literally accurate, including the idea that “God” made the world in six days, etc. etc. Over 80% of Christians believe in miracles (i.e. events that cannot be explained by the laws of nature – either known or unknown as of yet). Almost half of US Christians believe that the world will end in an Armageddon battle between Jesus Christ and the “antichrist”. In the US, the sale of 300,000 copies of any book is considered phenomenal, but the Christian fanatical “Left Behind” series has sold some 60 *million*.

This in a country where Islamic fanaticism is so widely denounced and reviled!

### **“American Exceptionalism”**

In the waning years of all previous empires, religious fanaticism was a distinct feature, as masses of people sought to console themselves for their apparent loss of control over the world as they knew it. In the US, this is compounded by the connected idea of “American exceptionalism”. This is the view that there is something exceptional and unique about the United States in world history. This view has historically been strengthened by the global domination of US capitalism. Often, this is linked with religious views – that US is specially blessed by “god” in a way that no other society is.

Now, as that domination crumbles, a sector of US society, reflecting a sector of the capitalist class itself, seeks to console itself in reflections on the past “glories” of US domination and seeks to return to that role. It could be done, after all, if only “America” would arouse itself out of its torpor and defeatism and become more decisive. This was what Bush represented, and while the majority of the US capitalist class rejected this simplistic view (as I wrote last week), another sector – plus their supporters in the middle and working classes – wish to return to it, but even more decisively.

### **Glorification of Violence**

This coincides with the historic glorification of violence in US society. Since the United States was established, it has never experienced a major invasion and occupation. This has allowed war to be glorified in a way that it is not in many other countries. This glorification of violence is seen in the films that US capitalism (Hollywood) pumps out – films that glorify violence (especially against women), war, etc. and which seek to give pleasure from viewing such violence. As a friend of a young man recently arrested for a brutal and apparently senseless murder said about the violent “music” form that he and his friend participate in, *“There’s no difference from what we do than going out on a Friday night to the newest horror movie... or turning on the news and hearing about brutal bloodshed and violence.”* (SF Chronicle, 9/21/09)

Thus it is that US culture can so easily support wars, torture, etc.

### **Energy Resources**

Phillips also points out that every modern-day empire was associated with domination of a prevalent energy source. The Dutch, during that empire’s heyday, were the foremost users of wind and water power. As coal power became a more important source, it was the British Empire that rose to prominence, partly due to their easy access to that energy source. Then, as oil replaced coal, the US Empire arose, again partly (but not entirely) due to the huge US oil reserves of the time. These reserves are now largely depleted, and this is one source of the decline in domination of US capitalism, but important aspects of the oil and car culture remain. The present capitalist campaign to break US society’s dependence on “foreign oil” is also partially an appeal to nostalgia for that time before the US had largely depleted its oil supplies.

Kevin Phillips, for instance, has shown that there tends to be a link between how much people drive cars and what sort of cars they drive and their general social attitudes. Those

who drive large gas-guzzlers tend to be more conservative. Again, that same nostalgia comes into play here.

Today, the US capitalist class consciously and systematically manipulates these cultural tendencies to gain support for the policies that match its interests. They consciously use these tendencies of obscure and turn people away from a class view of society. As US capitalism weakens its world domination, they will increase this drive.

### **Class Divide**

The only thing that stands in the way of this is class conflict and class struggle. At the same time as the US capitalist class seeks to manipulate “public opinion”, it will also be attacking the working class. This fundamental fact will not go unnoticed by many workers. It is true that many of them will get sucked into religious fanaticism and other confusions, but ultimately for many the class issue will tend to rise to the fore. As the crisis of the US Empire heightens, all the elements of the old order will tend to crumble, freeing the newer generations.

This tendency will be greatly accelerated and heightened as the class struggle breaks out more into the open around the world.