



Ferocity of Whites, Ferocity of Capitalism*

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Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Uribe's book needed to be written; now it must be read. The crimes against humanity perpetrated on a huge scale since 1492, centuries before the Nazi crimes – the genocide of Native Americans, the Atlantic slave trade and slavery – are known, or should be known, to everybody. But any reference to these crimes is immediately buried in the complacency of the public today, at least the citizens of the United States and of Europe. All this belongs to the past, albeit a sad, sickening one, but nonetheless a page of history that has fortunately, *definitively*, been turned (my emphasis).

We now live in the best of all worlds, striding forward on the radiant path of full respect for human rights, for all humans, on the road towards democracy (for all). It is the “end of history” we are told by Fukuyama: liberal democracy has written history's last chapter and there will be no more hereafter because this system is capable, by peaceful, nonviolent means, of solving all the problems faced by humanity. It already allows access and will increasingly allow access to all the benefits of civilisation both material and ethical. This nonsense is unfortunately the daily fare of some hundreds of million human beings: probably a majority of the 15 per cent of humanity that lives in the United States and Europe (to which I would add Japan, it being “honorary Whites” in the eyes of the apartheid regime!), and a small number of those who live elsewhere on the planet, i.e. “Western” facsimiles.

The magnitude of the crimes described in detail by Uribe is not disputed, as she points out in her preface. There may be here and there some eminent specialists (and I am not one of them) who could add some details, maybe correct some errors (that escaped my notice). That could be, but no researcher could, in good faith, claim any more than that.

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As for me, I do not know exactly what the definition of a “White” is. Ideology – and the law too, alas – categorises human beings in the United States as “White” (I have no idea why, as “Caucasians”! Perhaps to please Stalin!) and “Coloured” (everyone else). Everyone else! In the case of Blacks and people of mixed Black ancestry: in the United States, a “single drop of black blood” downgrades you – I nearly wrote *degrades you*. But how about the emigrants that came from Asian India, those who have a “white” skin and furthermore speak an Indo-European language, just like the “Caucasians”? And how about the Hispanics who are not from the indigenous peoples: Iberians and Italians? Are they “White Caucasians” or “Coloured”? In Europe there are those who are snow white in the North, and the dark-skinned Whites of the South. Are they as dark-skinned as the Arabs (White or not White?). Steve Biko, confronted with his torturer, disguised as a judge, who asked him a question about his colour, good-humouredly answered: “Why do you call yourselves white? You look more pink than white.” And the Jews – for whom the criteria for belonging to this so-called “community” I am unable to define – are they as white as the Europeans, or are they dark-skinned like their Semitic Arab cousins? Any individual can be good-looking or ugly, intelligent or stupid, kind or criminal, regardless of his or her skin colour. And very fortunately, I am not the only one to believe this. To definitively set aside some sort of para-theory about “human races” (be they three or fifteen matters very little) – at least in stated principles if not in the actual perceptions of all the individuals that inhabit our Earth – is in my view certainly a step forward. But it should not be an excuse to forget history and the questions that still affect the reality of our world.

The year 1492 in the subtitle of Plumelle-Urbe’s book is not a random date. Not the year of the “discovery of America” (in Eurocentric parlance), since I suppose that the human beings that lived there at the time had discovered it earlier. But if a date of birth had to be found for capitalism, this would be it. Along with a number of others, I talk about the six centuries of the history of capitalist modernity (1492 to the present day). Here is not the place to go into any further detail about our understanding of those six centuries.

Let me just recall what I have already said (and before me, Karl Marx and others): 1492 is when the conquest of the Americas by the Europeans from the Atlantic coasts – the Spaniards, Portuguese, British, French and Dutch – began. I call this “conquest and destruction”, destruction of the societies of American Indians (and therefore massacres methodically organised for that purpose) and then reconstruction of new societies shaped to serve the development of capitalism at the time in Atlantic Europe. The subjection of the surviving indigenous peoples and their reduction to the status of inferior

beings – quasi-slaves – followed by the establishment of plantations based on slave labour supplied by the Atlantic slave trade (the second genocide studied by Plumelle-Urbe) can only be meaningfully interpreted in the light of the analysis of what “historical capital” truly is.

It is a fact that historical capitalism originates in Atlantic Europe. I have put forward the thesis that the transition of forms of social organisation that pre-dated capitalist modernity had begun earlier and elsewhere, and that there is another explanation for the belated but decisive advance of Europe in this area than the legends built up by Eurocentric ideological historiography (“the European miracle” that comes after the “Greek miracle”, etc.). But again, this is not the topic of this foreword. Because historical capitalism emerged from the “Atlantic European” world, an equal sign might come to mind: capitalist equals European (hence “White”). This reduction/confusion still prevails.

The ferocity of the capitalism of what was called the mercantilist era (roughly 1500 to 1800) arises from the demands of what Marx refers to as “primitive capital accumulation”. This extreme ferocity was practised not only in the colonies of America and indirectly in Africa, which supplied the reservoir of slaves, but also in Europe itself, through the destruction of the ancient peasant economy, condemning millions of peasants to extreme poverty. Marx’s pleadings as a young lawyer in defence of the “wood thieves” of the Rhineland eloquently demonstrate this relationship between capital accumulation and ferocity. In England, the starving masses were caught for petty thefts and were lucky if they were sentenced only for deportation to Australia as convict labourers.

Does this ferocity abate with the passage from mercantilism and its accompanying primitive accumulation to the accomplished form of capitalism with the industrial revolution in England and the political revolution in France at the end of the eighteenth century? Certainly not, although it takes on new forms that emerge in Europe and the United States concurrently, as well as in the Iberian Americas and India, which by then was British, and later on in the African and Asian colonies.

In the case of Europe, ferocity characterises the exploitation of the new working class, which Engels describes in an explanation of what the implications of deploying the capitalist rationale are. One might be tempted to say all this belongs to the past. In many ways, yes, thanks to the victorious struggles of European workers that deserve respect and should be congratulated, and certainly not deplored!

An epitome of ferocity was reached with the expansion of capitalism in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. The extension westwards went hand-in-hand with what was no doubt one of the greatest genocides in

history, the organised, methodical massacre of all indigenous peoples in the region. And films that glorify cowboys who slaughter indigenous peoples are still served to educate children in this savage country almost to this very day. The British treated the indigenous peoples of Australia almost the same.

By comparison, neither the French of old Canada nor later on those of New Caledonia, the Spaniards in Latin America or the Russian Tsars planned the genocides of the peoples they conquered. In Latin America, the indigenous communities already decimated by the vicious conquest, dispossessed of their best land, the brutal, barbarian methods of subjection, survived nonetheless. So did the Kanaks and the Samoyeds. The Soviet Union, heir to the empire of the Tsars, gave the Samoyeds huge territories in Siberia and protected their culture. The United States and Canada have not even contemplated recognising that they were the perpetrators of unparalleled crimes against humanity. They are in no position to preach to others.

How can this special brand of barbarity of the Anglo-Americans be explained? Certainly not through their genes that can be speculated to be more criminogenic than those of other “White” peoples. No, the reason is that capitalism – because it was more advanced in its modern forms in the United Kingdom and the United States compared to Spain, France or Russia – proved to be systematically more efficient in its will to destroy the obstacles to its expansion.

In the United States, the triumphant new capitalism that started out from New England had no problem in accommodating the ferocious slavery of the southern states. After that, it turned the abolition of slavery to its advantage to subject the new proletariat – now supplemented by an additional black component – to an exploitation which “whether ferocious or not”, remained fundamentally associated with entrenched racism.

There was a parallel development in Latin America where the Creole ruling classes (Whites or pseudo-Whites) debased the indigenous peoples, reducing them to abject conditions.

The only revolutions experienced by the continent are the Saint-Domingue revolution (Blacks liberated by Blacks, not waiting for the “abolition of slavery”) – concomitant with the French Revolution (and commended by the *Montagnards*: the slaves of Saint-Domingue fought and won their freedom, they are citizens); and the later revolution of Mexico (1910–1920) followed by Cuba, where memories of slavery were still fresh.

Again, all this belongs to the past. At least, that was what was said in Europe during the first Belle Époque, 1890–1914. Savagery was over and done with. This discourse is very similar to the one in the second Belle

Époque, a century later (1990 to the present day and beyond) with “the end of history” discourse). Needless to say, at the time (1890), the voices of the Africans subjected to the colonial conquest went unheard. And anyway, the purpose of going there was to “civilise” them, to pull them out of poverty and from the ferocity of their internecine strife. Just as today NATO intervenes only to establish democracy... as clearly is the case in Libya.

In the meantime – between the first and second Belle Époque – there was Nazism. Plumelle-Urbe is right to say that the ferocity of the Nazis is not an anomalous, inexplicable occurrence. It is integral to the rationale for implementing ferocity, which, I once again stress, is inherent to capitalism. She and I both see that the ideology of “Western” countries does not always go in the best, the most humane direction, quietly advancing on the right track. On the contrary, its progression laid the foundations for and led to Nazism.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment was not uniformly racist, far from it. The anti-slavery movement, the preoccupation with defining genuinely universal values, occupied the thoughts of the best minds. Undoubtedly, that thinking remained Eurocentric. The “European miracle” was not attributed to the race, to the genes (whose existence was yet to be discovered), but rather to the “Greek ancestor”, the “Greek miracle”. This is a mythological construction, so be it. I have pointed out, along with the author of *Black Athena*, that ancient Greece was not the ancestor of Europe. Ancient Greece belonged to the ancient Orient. I have shown that Eurocentrism was built up from formulations originating from the Enlightenment.

It was in the nineteenth century that racism systematically took over the place of the Greek ancestor, thereby founding the new myth of European superiority (the superiority of Whites). This is a French invention: Arthur de Gobineau was the first to formulate this new “theory of races”. It was a resounding success. Influential politicians such as Chamberlain immediately adhered to this miserable new philosophy of history.

It is amusing to read the classifications of race popularised by these intellectual leaders of the last two centuries. The Germans rank themselves at the top, followed by the other Anglo-Saxons; the English have the same list, but put themselves above the Germans; the French justify their top position with an argument that I must admit is likeable: they are the heirs of the Revolution... which they nonetheless betrayed. The middle positions of the lists were consistently taken by more or less the same dark-skinned inhabitants of Southern Europe and Latin America. What about the “Asians”? The Chinese were at the bottom but the Japanese at the top. Baffling. The Indians of India, down at the bottom in spite of their “Indo-European” language. The

Muslims felt closer to Jews than to Christians, which is why they have never been “anti-Semitic”. Nowadays, it is taboo to mention that the Israelis (and hence the Jews) were placed way down the list of course, with the Arabs in a miserable position. Right at the very bottom, needless to say, as nearly always, the Negroes (as they were called at the time); no doubt because their status had been synonymous with that of a slave, an animal that speaks.

The hierarchy in these classifications was in line with the colonial conquests for which Black people (Africans) were the prime victims. Where it was possible, such as in South Africa, they were subjected to a particularly savage and humiliating regime of discrimination. Apartheid was not invented by the Boers, who were content with driving the Blacks off conquered land, but by the British Governor of the South African Union, a cultivated admirer of Plato’s praise of slavery. The new “Boer” state did of course inherit and apply the system on a large scale. This was no aberration, no remnant from the past, but a truly efficient system for the functioning of capitalism. The dominant media would have us believe that the ideology of the “liberals” was anti-apartheid. No. Apartheid was able to avail itself of the support of the United States and European countries until its very last gasp. Political apartheid was routed by the battles of the country’s Black people, and no one else. Hitler did not come up with anything very new in this area. His crime was to treat other “Whites” in the same way as the “races” categorised as “Coloured” were.

Césaire very rightly calls attention to the fact that what the Nazis were criticised for was that they extended to “Whites” a treatment that had heretofore been confined to others. An anecdote: I was watching the British film *Bridge on the River Kwai* again and I jumped when the British officer complained to his Japanese jailer that “they treat us like Indians!”.

To understand where this ferocity originates, look at the logic of capital: accumulate and accumulate, regardless of the price (in human terms). Capitalism is a system, indeed the first system that is founded on the principle whereby “wealth is source of power”. The love of money – to which utter devotion is owed because it is vital for the system to reproduce itself – “drives you to crime”. A crime hardly perceptible to the “stay-at-homes” who, although they might not join the ranks of the ferocious combat squads, keep quiet about the crimes perpetrated because they derive some tiny material benefit from the situation. And they know it. Individual crimes of all sorts committed by those that wield power: swindling, abuses (sexual) against employees, etc. But also crimes against humanity ordered and carried out by politicians in positions of command, both past and present. These men (and a few women) know what they are doing and the consequences of their decisions: they protect high finance and nothing else.

This is why, in spite of the “liberal” discourse, which indiscriminately sings the praises of modern times, ferocity is still on the daily agenda and ever more menacing. The revived popularity of fascism in Europe bodes of nothing that can justify optimism in this respect.

But at the same time, one should be aware that people under domination do not always respond with intelligible, noble resistance to the ferocity of the instruments for their oppression that they are confronted with.

There are innumerable examples of this type of sorry reactions, in particular in Latin America, precisely because this huge region of the South was shaped by capitalist colonisation earlier than the others. As a result, the entire continent of the Americas, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, is still today marked by a particular brand of barbarian violence, as illustrated by the example of the planned assassination of street children in Brazil.

We all know the criminal and stupid descent into organised massacres between peoples in the peripheries, such as Yugoslavia and many countries in the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia. These ferocious massacres were sometimes visibly ordered by the leaders of the world (“Western” or more precisely by those empowered to take political decisions in the major imperialist countries), or else sneakily or openly supported by the latter. For what reason? These absurd “conflicts” serve the cause: perpetuating the domination, not of the “West”, but of financial capital. An analysis of the reasons and mechanisms behind this ferocity is necessary, but it should not be used as an alibi to excuse it. It must become a means for mobilising peoples to end it.

While Uribe’s work deals with ferocity from 1492 onwards, I believe it is useful to dwell a little on ferocity preceding capitalist modernity because ferocity, alas, is as old as the world. It is important to know the reasons that foster it and hence the mechanisms through which it operates, so as to be able to better fight it.

Ancient violence was rooted in the battle for power, not money. With capitalism, money became a source of power. Previously, power was the source of wealth. There are innumerable examples of barbarian ferocity perpetrated by conquerors in the past: the hundreds of thousands of human heads cut off under the orders of Timur, for instance. These misdeeds were committed no less by Blacks, Asians, or people of other colours than they were by Whites. And generally the victims belonged to their own “racial group” (assuming this term is in any way meaningful), quite simply because the means at the time did not permit military expeditions to be carried out at the fringes of the planet.

The difference between the ferocity motivated by the battles for power of the Ancients and the ferocity motivated by modern accumulation of capital arises from the means available to the societies concerned. There is unfortunately no comparison between the means the Ancients had and the weapons of mass destruction of modern times. This is why those who have responsibility for the decisions to make use of these means are today the most colossal perpetrators of crimes against humanity ever to have existed, with the presidents of the United States in the lead.

How can this inclination for crime be explained? By the genes specific to the peoples associated with perpetrating them? By those of the individuals that give the orders for their perpetration? Certainly not. So what then? To the carnality inherent to the human race as a whole, as some anthropologists suggest? I am not qualified to settle this question. I would conclude simply by saying that this inclination, assuming it exists, must be fought and to do so requires questioning the *modus operandi* of the dual rationales of capital and power. A utopian struggle for the reconstruction of mankind and of society? Maybe... but a creative utopia, the only one that is worth devoting all one's strength, both ideological and political, too.