

# 400 Years and the Struggle to End Enslavement, Colonialism and Neo-colonialism

Africans taken to the British colony of Virginia set the stage for the rise of world capitalism and imperialism

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*Note: Following is the text of an address delivered by the author on Thursday February 28, 2019 at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. The event was held in honor of African American History Month. Azikiwe was invited to give this lecture by the African American Association.*

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This year's African American History Month takes on an added significance due to the fact that it represents the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of slavery in the British colony of Virginia, in an area now known as the United States.

In acknowledgement of this anniversary, the West African government of Ghana has made an offer within the framework of the "Year of Return" for Black people in the Western Hemisphere that they are welcome to visit their ancestral homeland and to resettle if so desired. This declaration represents a continuation of the centuries-long efforts to reconnect Africans to the land from which they were torn asunder during the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During August 1619 a British ship under a Dutch flag transported stolen human cargo to the Jamestown Settlement. This colony would serve as a major entry point for Africans for more than another 200 years.

The Africans were kidnapped from the area which is known as Angola today in the Southwest region of the continent. This geographical region has a history of resistance to imperialism from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Queen Nzinga of the Mbundu people defied Portuguese efforts to colonize Luanda and consolidate their grip on the slave trade in the region. Her rule in the area was marked by a capacity to engage in military attacks as well as diplomatic engagements with both Portugal and The Netherlands.

An account of her contributions reveals:

"In 1626 Nzinga became Queen of the Mbundu when her brother committed suicide in the face of rising Portuguese demands for slave trade concessions. Nzinga, however, refused to allow them to control her nation. In 1627, after forming alliances with former rival states, she led her army against the Portuguese, initiating a thirty-year war against them. She exploited European


rivalry by forging an alliance with the Dutch who had conquered Luanda in 1641. With their help, Nzinga defeated a Portuguese army in 1647. When the Dutch were in turn defeated by the Portuguese the following year and withdrew from Central Africa, Nzinga continued her struggle against the Portuguese. Now in her 60s she still personally led troops in battle. She also orchestrated guerilla attacks on the Portuguese which would continue long after her death and inspire the ultimately successful 20th Century armed resistance against the Portuguese that resulted in independent Angola in 1975. Despite repeated attempts by the Portuguese and their allies to capture or kill Queen Nzinga, she died peacefully in her eighties on December 17, 1663.” (See [this](#))

This historical episode is a reflection of the early forms of obstruction by African people against slavery and colonialism. The phenomenon of organized and spontaneous opposition to European domination would continue as more Africans were taken and enslaved in the Western Hemispheric outposts within North America, Central America, the Caribbean and South America.

The origins of British occupation of Virginia are to be found in the establishment of the London Company, sometimes referred to as the Virginia Company of London. The business was a British joint-stock company founded in 1606 by a royal charter under the control of King James. Its purpose was to secure a British presence as colonizers along the east coast of North America.

This land turned over to the London Company encompassed the eastern coast of what became known as the United States beginning in the 34th parallel (Cape Fear) extending north to the 41st parallel (in Long Island Sound). Included in the Virginia Company and Colony, the London Company laid arbitrary claims to an enormous section of Atlantic and Inland Canada. The company then mandated the building of a 100-square-mile (260 km<sup>2</sup>) settlement. The expropriated land north of the 38th parallel was then divided up with the Plymouth Company, under an agreement that this company would not establish a colony within 100 miles (161 km) of the other settlement.

Therefore it is clear that the main purpose for the disempowerment of the Indigenous people and the enslavement of African people was the acquisition of land and the exploitation of labor for profit. From an historical perspective it was solely the European Americans who benefitted from the economic system of slavery.

**Will be Sold,**  
*Before the door of the Eagle Tavern.*  
 At 12 o'clock, on Monday the 24th instant,  
 A NUMBER OF  
**VALUABLE**  
  
**SLAVES;**  
 CONSISTING OF  
 An excellent Carpenter, a Brick Moulder,  
 A Tanner, a good Crop Hand,  
 2 Women, and 5 children.  
*The Women are excellent House Servants  
 and young, the Men too are mostly young.*  
 A credit of Ninety Days will be given, the purchaser giving a Ne-  
 gotiable Note, with an approved endorser, but if the purchaser prefers  
 paying Cash, it will be received, in which case the legal discount will  
 be allowed.  
**Thomas Taylor.**  
 February 17, 1812.  
 J. O'LYNCH, PR.  
*Printed for the Proprietor of the  
 Virginia Chronicle at the  
 Office of the Proprietor, No. 10  
 South Street, New York.*

Slave advertisement for the acquisition of Africans

The 20 or more Africans who were transported from Angola in August 1619 were sold off to land owners in the region. Between the years of 1619 to 1660, it is said that Africans brought to Virginia were indentured servants, similar to European people who were transported over to North America to work. Some Africans did win their freedom as early as the middle decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, these questions become secondary when viewing how the law was modified to justify the permanent enslavement of African people by the conclusion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Even the Encyclopedia of Virginia says of this period that:

"During most of the 1600s, Virginia's labor force consisted primarily of white indentured servants and a handful of convict laborers, who in many cases were treated no better than slaves. Some Virginia Indians also worked as servants or, more often, were enslaved. In the 1670s, the ratio of white servants to enslaved Africans was four to one. But that changed dramatically during the

next twenty years, so that by the early 1690s the ratio had reversed: there were now four times as many enslaved Africans as white servants in Virginia. By 1705, with the General Assembly's passage of 'An act concerning Servants and Slaves' (also known as the Slave Code of 1705), slavery had become ensconced at all levels of Virginia society. Some historians explain this change by pointing to social shifts following Bacon's Rebellion (1676-1677) that increased white Virginians' hostility toward non-whites. This early form of racism led white Englishmen to think of dark-skinned peoples as inferior. Other historians point out that the move to slavery only occurred when the flow of servants from England fell off dramatically around 1680. Still others suggest that only at this time did the English, having established the Royal African Company in 1660, become more involved in the Atlantic slave trade. As a result, enslaved Africans became less expensive. To wealthy planters and small farmers a like, slaves made better long-term economic sense than indentured servants." (See [this](#))

All during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the number of enslaved Africans grew exponentially amid the thriving of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The 13 colonies and their leaders yearned for a separation from Britain when it appeared as if the institution of slavery would be formally prohibited.

Yearning for independence from Britain accelerated after several legal and legislative decisions portending the eventual dissolution of African chattel enslavement. After the Declaration of Independence and the defeat of London by 1783, the actual U.S. Constitutional apportionment of the House of Representatives was based upon the economic interests of the slaveholding class in the South.

The so-called three-fifths clause of the Constitution gave unwarranted political advantage to the slave states in order to maintain national unity. The unity was actually based on the overall national oppression of African people which would burst asunder after the elections of 1860 and the commencement of the Civil War the following year. The Civil War resulted in the military defeat of the Confederate states.

Africans were not deployed on the Union side of the War until after the defeats by the North during 1862. Plans were made by the Lincoln administration and the Union army for the possible evacuation of Washington, D.C. Nonetheless, a series of developments would reverse the course of the War.

These developments included the increasing flight and rebellion by enslaved Africans from the plantation system. There was also the decision made by Lincoln at the aegis of abolitionist leaders such as Frederick Douglass to arm the displaced African population which had been categorized as "contraband" during 1861-62. At least 186,000 Africans were enlisted in the Union army and by all accounts fought gallantly for the defeat of the slaveholding rebel states.

However, the question would not be resolved as to what the status of the Africans would be after the conclusion of the War. Although the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment had been vociferously debated in Congress as early as January 1865, there was no agreement in regard to the legal abolition of slavery in the U.S.

With the surrender of the Confederate Generals in April 1865, the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was not solidified until the conclusion of that year. Moreover, the

Emancipation Proclamation of 1862-1863 did not provide citizenship rights or self-determination to Africans living in the Confederate states. It would take the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution passed in 1868 which provided equal protection and due process to African people. Despite the passage of these two Constitutional Amendments the economic basis for the rise of the Confederacy was not completely destroyed.

### The Economic Basis of the Politics of Enslavement

As we mentioned earlier, the business of trafficking and exploiting African labor was quite profitable to the extent that it was a prerequisite to industrial capitalism in Western Europe and North America. The internationalization of the capitalist mode of production and social relations transitioned the exploitative system from mercantilism to capitalism and modern-day imperialism.

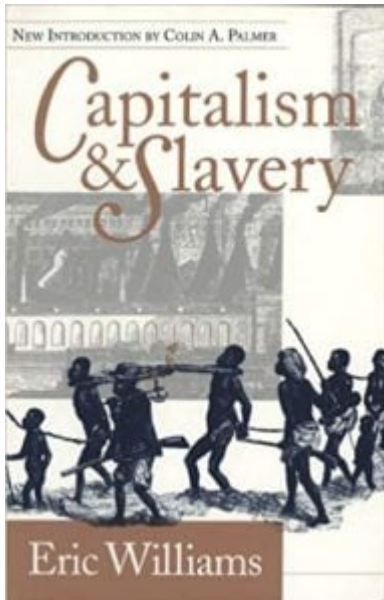
V.I. Lenin argued in his book entitled "Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism," published in 1916 during the height of World War I, that the banks were the principal controllers of the global system which is effectively at the source of the contradictions between the workers, farmers on one side and the ruling class on the other. The growth of banking in earlier centuries is directly connected to the Atlantic Slave Trade. The capital accrued in the triangular methods of commerce was utilized to fuel the engines of industry.

Mass production of commodities became the mechanism for generating even greater profitability creating the extra capital to invest in the expansion of operations. Enslaved African labor produced the cotton, tobacco and sugar which were the main commodities marketed in both the colonies and the metropolises. The burgeoning mechanization of production was reliant heavily on raw agricultural products such as cotton.

Data related to the cultivation and export of cotton in the Southern U.S. indicate that the expansion westward and south was clearly related to the demand for cotton in the textile factories of the northern urban areas and Britain. Even after the beginning of the Civil War during 1861-1865, British industry continued their imports of cotton. It would take an international campaign targeting this link in order to build British support for the ending of African enslavement in the U.S.

After the ostensible ban on the international African slave trade the breeding and trafficking in human cargo escalated domestically. This process required even more draconian laws to socially contain the African population. Rebellions and flight from bondage were the underlying source of the paranoia of the slave masters facing financial ruin due to the unrest on the plantations and the declining rate of profit from the peculiar institution.

Banking then became closely linked with the insurance industry. The insuring of the life of enslaved Africans where the benefits claimed by the slave traders and masters further reinforced the commodification of human beings.



A study in the dialectical relationship between the British economy and African labor exploitation was conducted by Dr. Eric Williams of Trinidad. The 1944 book entitled "Capitalism and Slavery," served as an indictment of the Triangular Trade.

Williams said of the banking industry in Britain:

"Many of the eighteenth century banks established in Liverpool and Manchester, the slaving metropolis and the cotton capital respectively, were directly associated with the triangular trade. Here large sums were needed for the cotton factories and for the canals which improved the means of communication between the two towns. Typical of the eighteenth century banker is the transition from tradesman to merchant and then the further progression from merchant to banker. The term 'merchant,' in the eighteenth century context, not infrequently involved the gradations of slaver captain, privateer captain, privateer owner, before settling down on shore to the respectable business of commerce. The varied activities of a Liverpool businessman include: brewer, liquor merchant, grocer, spirit dealer, bill-broker, banker, etc."

The banks supplied the loans for the expansion of the production of commodities. English labor was exploited as well. However, the rate of return on the exploitation of African labor far exceeded that of what became known as "free labor." Many within Britain came to see the moral injustices of African enslavement anchored on religious grounds and stemming from the ideas of equality surfacing in the period of Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, the profits from this trade were quite lucrative surpassing anything witnessed in recorded history. Consequently, slavery continued as an economic system well into the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba and Brazil. A Civil War fought in the U.S. may have legally ended involuntary servitude there was still a protracted struggle to be waged to win any recognition of the human value of the African person.

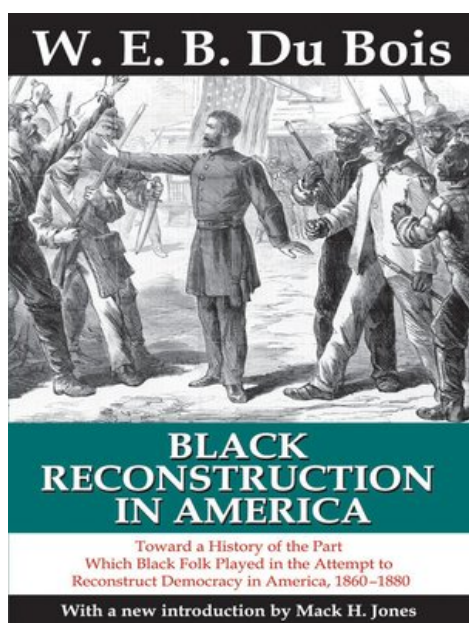
This requires an examination of what was actually at stake in the U.S. Today and in the past it was frequently asserted that the maintenance of African enslavement was a question of state's rights and sovereignty. In other cases the inhuman economic system was romanticized and linked with a mythical white southern gentlemanly culture with the grace

of interpersonal interactions and benevolent treatment of the African people.

Yet the practice of beating, torture, rape, the disruption of families, lynching, etc., cannot be idealized by anyone other a racist. African people did not ask to be enslaved and they sought various means to liberate themselves from this horrendous experience.

Even those who were able to flee to areas where they would purportedly be safe from enslavement, there was always the slave catchers and others hell bent on sending people back into bondage. The concept of buying one's own freedom seems counterintuitive, since people are theoretically born emancipated from ownership by others.

The debate over the character of the slave economy is an ongoing even within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Various views on the enslavement of Africans determine political positions on how best to make amends for the centuries-long injustice. If the nature of the system can be framed as being relatively benign it would obviously mean that there is no need to change the order of the current imperialist system. If the reverse is true, suggesting the overthrow of imperialism is the only adequate correction possible to democratize the world system as it stands in the contemporary era.



Du Bois in “Black Reconstruction in America” notes in the chapter entitled “The Planter” emphasizes:

“The ability of the slaveholder and landlord to sequester a large share of the profits of slave labor depended upon his exploitation of that labor, rather than upon high prices for his product in the market. In the world market, the merchants and manufacturers had all the advantage of unity, knowledge and purpose, and could hammer down the price of raw material. The slaveholder, therefore, saw Northern merchants and manufacturers enrich themselves from the results of Southern agriculture. He was angry and used all of his great political power to circumvent it. His only effective economic movement, however, could take place against the slave. He was forced, unless willing to take lower profits, continually to beat down the cost of his slave labor.”

This no doubt enhanced the brutal and repressive mechanism of containment. The drive for profits coupled with the competition for political control with the burgeoning industrialists of

the North, heightened the social contradictions forcing an inevitable eruption of struggle leading to total warfare to determine the uncontested dominance over the direction of the economic system.

In this same above-mentioned chapter, Du Bois says:

“But there was another motive which more and more strongly as time went on compelled the planter to cling to slavery. His political power was based on slavery. With four million slaves he could balance the votes of 2,400,000 Northern voters, while in the inconceivable event of their becoming free their votes would outnumber those of his Northern opponents, which was precisely what happened in 1868.”

Referring to the passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment which granted “citizenship rights” to the formerly enslaved Africans, it invariably turned out that yet another amendment, the 15<sup>th</sup>, would be needed to guarantee the franchise in 1870. With all three of these measures spanning the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution, notwithstanding the various Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870 and 1875, this level of due process, access to the ballot and the holding of public office would only be supported by the Federal Reconstruction government influenced by the Radical Republicans until the compromise surrounding the contested 1876 presidential elections.

By the conclusion of the 1880s, and certainly at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a re-enslavement in practice bolstered by state laws popularly referred to as Jim Crow, became paramount in the South as well as other regions of the U.S. Extra-judicial murder utilizing conspiratorial arrangements involving landowners, businesspeople, law-enforcement, the courts, and penal institutions, rendered African people to social status reminiscent of the years leading up to the Civil War.

The significance of the work of African American historian and social scientist Du Bois is highlighted in the following passages which further expose the slaveocracy: “As the economic power of the planter waned, his political power became more and more indispensable to the maintenance of his income and profits. Holding his industrial system secure by this political domination, the planter turned to the more systematic exploitation of his black labor. One method called for more land and the other for more slaves. Both meant not only increased crops but increased political power. It was a temptation that swept greed, religion, military pride and dreams of empire to its defense. There were two possibilities. He might follow the old method of the early West Indian sugar plantations: work his slaves without regard to their physical condition, until they died of over-work or exposure, and then buy new ones. The difficulty of this, however, was that the price of slaves, since the attempt to abolish the slave trade, was gradually rising. This in the deep South led to a strong and gradually increasing demand for the reopening of the African slave trade, just as modern industry demands cheaper and cheaper coolie labor in Asia and half-slave labor in African mines.”

Such a system of engrained exploitation and national oppression rationalized through institutional racism could only be disposed of through a revolutionary upheaval uprooting its economic base. This occurred partly during the Civil War and the following decades. At the same time the existence of racist labor market could still be utilized in the rural South and

the industrialized North to weaken the struggle against the national oppressed and the working class in general.

African migration northward and westward accelerating on the eve of World War I was incentivized by higher wages and the imperative of restraining free white American and European immigrant labor seeking to organize against the horrible conditions prevailing in mines, plants, mills and foundries of the era. Racial segregation attempted to win over the European American worker to a false notion of superiority while in the same instance intensifying their exploitation as well.

As the urban areas expanded and agricultural production became more mechanized, there was the dislocation of millions from the white and African populations. In the cities, slums and unsanitary conditions were the norm. Yet the European could ostensibly take comfort in the fact that their social conditions were not as bad as the African Americans. This mentality prevails well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is responsible for the fragmentation of the working class and the renewed attempts aimed at the marginalization of the Black people.

Combined, the false sense of contentment among the Europeans and the continuing neo-colonial status of Africans in the U.S., serves as the illusory façade of social equilibrium amid expanding inequality and instability. These factors constitute the enormous challenges for those pressing for a thorough transformation of the status quo.

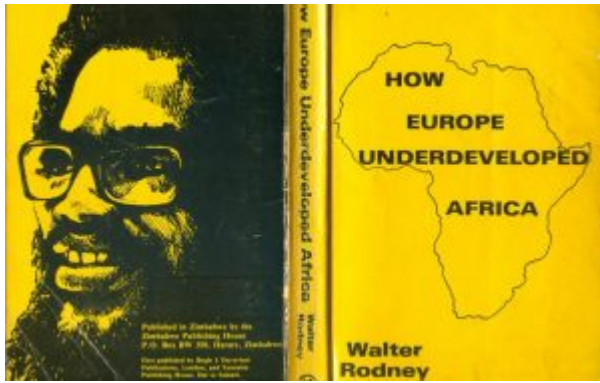
#### The Lingering Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Often enough it is said by Conservatives that the historical existence of African enslavement should not have even the slightest residual effect on the political and social construct of U.S. society in the present period. Some five decades since the Civil Rights era of the post-World War II years provided the legal apparatus which could ensure the existence of equal opportunity for African Americans, so the axioms are articulated.

The statistical disparities between African Americans and Europeans have far less to do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the legacy of institutional racism, national oppression and enslavement than the failure of the formerly enslaved to take advantage of the opportunities which are available to them. In other words, any degree of inequality and discrimination are secondary to the capacity of African Americans to gain their rightful place within U.S. society.

These same platitudes are extended to the conditions existing among African people on the continent and other parts of the world. Africa with all of its resources and human capital continues to suffer from poverty due to corruption and lack of moral fortitude among the people who seems to be governing these emerging nation-states.

Such a set of assumptions are inherently racist and ignore the realities of the present international system of economic exchange and authority. Until there is a complete break with the character of imperialism there cannot be total freedom for the oppressed.



How development is defined is a key component in grasping the exigencies of the African condition. African Guyanese historian Dr. Walter Rodney in his book “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa” published in Tanzania in 1972 and circulated internationally draws upon the inherently dialectical character of underdevelopment and development.

Applying the principles of Marxist analysis known as historical materialism, Rodney stresses:

“A second and even more indispensable component of modern underdevelopment is that it expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another. All of the countries named as ‘underdeveloped’ in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now preoccupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation. African and Asian societies were developing independently until they were taken over directly or indirectly by the capitalist powers. When that happened, exploitation increased and the export of surplus ensued, depriving the societies of the benefit of their natural resources and labor. That is an integral part of underdevelopment in the contemporary sense.”

This type of analysis is sometimes characterized as rigid or structuralist. Apologists for the current world order of inequality and subjugation of certain regions by the ruling class within others advances the notions of a gradual lifting of the masses from impoverishment. The instability of this development model, where limited quantitative growth ebbs and flows, is frequently explained in a similar fashion as the boom to bust cycle of the metropolitan capitalist system.

The underlying reasons behind this pendulum swing are the policy initiatives of politicians and parties, of which in essence are capitalist in their orientation. In the contemporary framework, the current President Donald Trump makes statements saying the U.S. economy is doing better than any other time in history. That the African American jobless rate is lower than it has ever been since data has been collected by the federal government.

These obviously false and preposterous claims are political in character. It is to say as was done during slavery that the African people are better off under the exploitative system. According to the racists there is no alternative to the domination of Europeans over Africans and other peoples of color in the world.

The truth of the matter is the problems of poverty and underdevelopment are systematic requiring the reconstruction of the economic system based upon the interests of the majority members of the exploited social class within society. Rodney addresses this necessity by point out:

“In some quarters, it has often been thought wise to substitute the term ‘developing’ for ‘underdeveloped’. One of the reasons for so doing is to avoid any unpleasantness which may be attached to the second term, which might be interpreted as meaning underdeveloped mentally, physically, morally or in any other respect. Actually, if ‘underdevelopment’ were related to anything other than comparing economies, then the most underdeveloped country in the world would be the U.S.A, which practices external oppression on a massive scale, while internally there is a blend of exploitation, brutality, and psychiatric disorder. However, on the economic level, it is best to remain with the word ‘underdeveloped’ rather than ‘developing’, because the latter creates the impression that all the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are escaping from a state of economic backwardness relative to the industrial nations of the world, and that they are emancipating themselves from the relationship of exploitation. That is certainly not true, and many underdeveloped countries in Africa and elsewhere are becoming more underdeveloped in comparison with the world’s great powers, because their exploitation by the metropolises is being intensified in new ways.”

These words are even more poignant in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the gap separating the wealthy and impoverished is rising to unprecedented levels. We live in an epoch where the thirst for unlimited profits is threatening the existence of the planet through the manufacture of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. The potential imperilment of humanity is also driven by the failure to recognize the damage being done to the environment by the use of hazardous materials in the production and disposal process.

Shortages generated by the unequal distribution of fuel, food and energy resources can only exacerbate social tensions. These factors are by nature destabilizing. In order to maintain the existing order, the Pentagon and NATO have opened military bases around the globe spreading their influence while inequality persists.

Today the level of dislocation is greater than any time since the conclusion of World War II. United Nations agencies tasked to respond to humanitarian crises have documented that 75 million people are living as refugees or internally displaced persons. This situation is the result of imperialism which has waged war in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and other geo-political regions. Migrants are seeking admission into the western industrialized states whose military forces and exploitative economic institutions have repressed and exploited their counties of origin.

Rather than address these failed foreign policies, the leaders of the West are reverting back to the mythology of past centuries. They dream of building fortress states aimed at keeping out the poor and dispossessed. The contradiction in such thinking is made futile by the rapidly worsening conditions of the working class and poor within the metropolises themselves.

In this “Year of Return” there is much to contemplate in regard to the domestic and world situations. The current generations must organize to change the system fundamentally since the future of the planet depends upon what we do today. This is our mission extending beyond 2019 to ensure the future of humanity and the realization of social equality, prosperity and genuine development for all.

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