

# A "Fellow Traveler" Looks at Imperialism

By EARL BROWDER

SCOTT Nearing has published his new book on Imperialism, which he says is the ripe fruit of 25 years of study and writing. ("The Twilight of Empire," Vanguard Press, N. Y., 340 pages). The book gains a topical interest from the fact that it was the occasion for severance of Nearing from membership in the Communist Party. In this book Nearing finally demonstrates his inability to understand Marxism, demonstrates his fundamentally mystic or religious philosophy, which prevents him from understanding or contributing to that revolutionary movement to which he gives emotional allegiance. This article has the purpose of establishing the relation of Nearing's thought to various schools of bourgeois philosophy, and its antagonism to that of Marx and Lenin.

## I. MATERIALISM OR IDEALISM.

Nearing claims for his work that it "follows the Marxian method." The Marxian method is the method of dialectical materialism. But Nearing's method is neither dialectical nor materialist; it is eclectic and idealist. While he quotes briefly from Marx and Lenin, the influence of their thought is quite absent. On the other hand, the influence of Oswald Spengler dominates the whole book, although his name creeps into only the bibliography, with a smattering here and there of other schools. Whether Nearing knows it or not (it seems incredible that he should be unconscious of such an issue) he rejects the fundamental basis of Marxism as well as the method.

From the beginning, Nearing's method is to "explain" modern imperialism by analogy with imperialist systems of the past. He searches for an "orderly pattern" to which corresponds all "imperialist" phases of history. With this pattern he professes to find the "explanation" of imperialism. The law of movement of modern imperialism he says, is to be found by tracing the "pattern" of the Empires of Rome, Greece, Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt.

In this there is the "morphology" of Goethe or the "Destiny" of Spengler, but nothing whatever of Marx and Lenin. The sterile "pattern" which Nearing searches out with such labor, has about as much relation to the actual events of history as the equally sterile "will of God" of the theologians. In fact, the only event that

Nearing's pattern will ever explain, will be that event when Nearing publicly confesses his belief in God.

So we find in Nearing's very approach to his subject, in his formulation of the question to be answered, a rejection of Marxism. Implicit in his method is an idealistic philosophy, which predetermines that his conclusions will be wrong.

## II. WHAT IS IMPERIALISM?

Nearing takes the 17 pages of Part I. to establish his definition of imperialism. He quotes (apparently with approval) Lenin's definition of imperialism as "a peculiar phase of capitalist development" in which:

"The domination of monopolies and finance capital has acquired very great importance; in which the division of the world among the big international trusts has begun; in which the partition of all the territories of the earth among the great capitalist powers has been completed."

But immediately he forgets all about Lenin, and on the very next page he gives his own definition in the following words:

"Imperialism is the stage of economic and political development during which a ruling class conquers and exploits beyond the boundaries of the civil state." (page 16).

What has Nearing accomplished by substituting his own definition for that of Lenin? He has removed the examination from "a particular phase of capitalist development" to a general examination of civilization as a whole; he has substituted "conquest and exploitation beyond the boundaries of the civil state" as the chief characteristics of imperialism, in place of its character as a system of capitalist class division and rule of the entire world. In place of the concrete examination of the actual imperialism of the modern world, Nearing has taken not even the concrete examination of some other "imperialist" system, but an ideal, abstract, non-existent "imperialism in general"—something which might be likened to the Hegelian "idea" which works itself out in the world of matter, except that Nearing does not even use the idealist Hegelian dialectic.

Within the limits of Nearing's definition, all conquest and exploitation is imperialism, provided it crosses a state boundary; from which basis it is possible to wander over the whole earth and through all history, for so long as there have been state boundaries there have been conquest and exploitation. Thus the study of imperialism for Nearing is at once broadened into a study of universal history; which history, further, becomes the repetition of a certain pattern; and the explanation of history is the recognition of the pattern in its various repetitions.

So we find Nearing's first step into his subject matter results

in blurring all the sharp outlines of the problem, wipes out all definiteness and concreteness, and for the material problems of imperialism it substitutes the abstractions of an idealistic "pattern"—the substitution of Lenin by Spengler, of materialism by idealism.

### III. HISTORICAL PARALLELISM AND MARX.

There is no greater master of the use of historical analogy than Marx. But there is no greater enemy of a mechanical historical parallelism than this same Marx, whose system of thought is founded upon concreteness as a test of truth. In one of his most brilliant historical studies, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Marx introduces the work with a brief but profound observation on this question. He said:

"Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historical events and persons reappear in one form or another. He forgot to add: once as a tragedy, and the second time as a farce."

Directing himself against precisely such methods as that of Nearing, who seeks the "universal pattern," Marx said:

"So extensive are the differences between the material and economic conditions of the class war in classical and modern times, that the political incidents born out of the struggle in our epoch and the other can have no more resemblance to one another than the Archbishop of Canterbury has to the High Priest Samuel."

It is true that Marx also formulated "universal laws" of history, but in no sense as substitutes for the concrete examination of the laws of each separate epoch; on the contrary, the "universal laws" of Marx were directed precisely towards emphasizing the *differences* between the various epochs and stages of history, and the necessity for finding the specific laws of each epoch as the only way to concrete understanding. Nearing quotes one of these formulations of Marx, without being able, however, to draw its logical conclusions in his own work. In the preface to the "Critique of Political Economy" Marx said:

"In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation on which rise legal and political super-structures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness."

From this "universal law" of human history, we obtain the refutation of all such attempts as that of Nearing to find the "universal pattern" which predetermines the historical forms independently of those specific productive relationships peculiar to

each historical epoch. The productive relationships of ancient and medieval empires were as different from those of today as "the Archbishop of Canterbury is different from the High Priest Samuel." Any and all attempts to explain modern imperialism by parallels with Greece, Rome, Babylon, or Egypt, are reactionary and obscurantist. They have no connection with Marxism or Leninism. They are the intellectual trash produced by the bourgeois understanding and outlook; and they cannot assist the proletariat in its historical task of destroying imperialism.

#### IV. TAUTOLOGY IN PLACE OF THOUGHT

Inevitably the idealist philosopher comes to the point where he must insert the factor God, or cover up the gap with tautology. Nearing does not bring his God into public view, but his system of thought cries aloud for a God to sustain its logic. Hence we expect to find many tautological paragraphs, and our search for them is not without result. This is particularly true at those points where we have to deal with the problem of the how and why of historical turns, the transition from one epoch or stage to another. Dealing with appearance of imperialism, Nearing formulates the explanation as follows:

*"This wide diffusion of empire building corresponds with the contention that imperialism is a phase of the exploitative process. Irrespective of race or color, when human societies have reached the stage of social development called civilization, the forces of imperialism have shown themselves. This could hardly be otherwise, since imperialism is a phase of civilization." (pp. 27-28).*

Here is tautology of the purest water. Since civilization has been defined as the stage of history which produces imperialism, the appearance of imperialism is explained by the fact that the stage of civilization has been reached. And this is the "system" by means of which Nearing takes care of the critical points, the points where a historical turn must be explained. The tautology covers up the absence of a moving force, fills the gap which otherwise would require the entrance of God upon the scene.

What this says, stripped to its essentials, is that since Nearing has defined imperialism as a phase of civilization, no further examination of the origins of imperialism is necessary once the fact is established that the stage of civilization has been reached. "Imperialism, in other words, has been characteristic of the whole era of civilization" (p. 21). Or, more simply yet, imperialism and civilization are co-extensive and practically synonymous.

Civilization, in its turn, receives a definition as "the era of private property in land and other social productive goods" (p. 22). Thus we come to the conclusion that the rule of imperialism and

of private property are identical. Granted that the system of private property is the necessary condition for the rise of imperialism, it is necessary to recall Professor Nearing to the problem of why, given a foundation of private property, a particular imperialism arises at a particular time, and especially the problem of how and why modern imperialism with all its *specific* features arose out of capitalism. With these questions unanswered, the door has been left open, with an invitation upon it for God to enter.

And does Nearing really insist upon describing every society based upon private property as imperialist? In that case, since we have no colonies without this predominant characteristic, the distinction between the oppressing and the oppressed nations has been destroyed by the metaphysics of Nearing.

That is where idealism leads in the study of imperialism.

#### V. THE IMPERIAL PATTERN.

Nearing has found the fundamental laws of motion of imperialist development, traced in an "imperial pattern," which has been uniformly followed by the history of all known "empires." This pattern he gives as the basis for an understanding of modern capitalist imperialism. What is this pattern?

The pattern is a cycle of five stages, with each stage containing a varying number of sub-stages. The stages are:

(1) Establishment of the imperial nucleus; (2) Expansion; (3) Conflict for survival; (4) Imperial world supremacy; (5) Disintegration and dissolution. The last stage of the cycle becomes the starting point for the beginning of the cycle all over again.

Applying this pattern to the present-day world, all nations will have to be placed in one of the first three stages of the cycle. All nations are imperial nuclei in one or another stage of growth. Within the pattern, almost hidden by its main outlines, are certain sub-stages which are characterized by "revolts" of the oppressed. Thus, under the first stage, sub-stage Number Five includes "exploited slaves, peasants and artisans revolt." In the second stage, at a certain point "colonial business men unite with exploited workers in revolts against exploitation by foreigners." In the third stage, strangely enough, we find wars but no revolts (evidently this is the stage of "organized capitalism"!—of the liquidation of the inner contradictions!); out of the wars "one of the rival empires comes out on top and establishes its position as the supreme world empire." This brings us to the fourth stage (the stage of "super-imperialism!"), the description of which by Nearing sounds like Lovestone describing the "Hooverian Age" of the American Empire, a period of peace and prosperity, of riches, magnificence and stability, with nary a hint of revolt. In the fifth and the final stage, sadly enough,

"a parasite class develops," "a bureaucracy is built up," and other unpleasant things occur; finally "colonial revolts" and in the last sub-stage of the final stage "imperial decay sets in." This is, slightly condensed, the description of the imperial cycle discovered by Nearing as the fruit of his 25 years of study and research on the subject.

This cycle or "pattern," is the one single dominating thought from beginning to end of Nearing's book. It contains the Alpha and Omega of his political wisdom. With unconscious irony it is presented as an application of the Marxian method!

#### VI. NEARING'S "PATTERN" AND SPENGLER'S "DESTINY."

The use of the term "cycle" by Nearing to describe his "pattern," was perhaps an attempt to relate it to the cycle of capitalist production analyzed by Marx. But the similarity ends in the word. There is no relation to Marxism in his thought. In spite of its being put forth with the trappings of "science," Nearing's pattern is a crude adaptation of the openly anti-scientific philosophy of Oswald Spengler.

Very briefly to trace the relationship between Nearing's "pattern" and Spengler's "Destiny," we examine the latter's "pattern" as contained in the charts attached to "Decline of the West" (English Edition, published by Knopf, N. Y.). There we find the "destiny cycle" of universal history expressed in terms of spiritual epochs, cultural epochs, and political epochs (the latter including incidentally an interpretation of imperialism). Spengler has four phases to his cycle instead of Nearing's five, but, as we quickly see, this is only because Nearing's special needs called for a division of Spengler's third phase into two separate ones.

Spengler's "spiritual cycle" contains four "epochs" or phases, which he names Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The first corresponds to Nearing's "Establishment of the imperial nucleus," the second to his "expansion," the third to his "Conflict for survival" and also "Imperial World Supremacy" (or, "conflict" could be included in the second with "expansion," according to taste), and the fourth to his "Disintegration and dissolution."

The "cultural cycle" is described also in four epochs, phases, or periods, corresponding generally to the "spiritual." The "political cycles," likewise, follows the same "pattern," beginning with the gathering of Nearing's "imperial nuclei," under the terms "primitive folk, tribes and their chiefs"; passing through "expansion" under the description "fashioning of a world of States"; and so on to the final "disintegration and dissolution" with "primitive human conditions slowly thrust up into the highly civilized mode of living."

We have taken space for such a detailed paralleling of Near-

ing's and Spengler's cycles in order to bring out sharply how close in thought is the "Marxist," Nearing, and the open scoffer at science, Spengler; the self-styled exponent of "economic determinism" and the open champion of Destiny. Nearing uses the words and phrases of science, but his thought is determined by the same religious preconceptions as that of Spengler, the bourgeois idealist philosopher.

#### VII. NEARING AND THE BOURGEOIS "HISTORICAL SCHOOL!"

Outside of the scheme of the "pattern," Nearing draws little directly from the thought of Spengler, but rather depends upon the so-called historical school of bourgeois thought. In attempting a parallel of modern imperialism with the empires of classical and ancient times, Nearing was not attempting anything new. It has been done time and again, and time and again it has been answered by Marxists. For example, we turn to Pavlovitch, whose book of lectures (1919) finds its points directed exactly against Nearing's thesis. A few quotations from Pavlovitch will serve to draw sharper the line that separates Nearing from Marx:

"From the point of view of the representatives of the historical school, imperialism exists at all stages of human development; from the moment that human society was formed, imperialist policy commenced. . . . We reject these attempts at this too extended interpretation of 'imperialism.' We consider it wholly unscientific to try to discover the phenomenon of imperialism in the history of the Jewish nation, of Sparta, of Athens, and so on. . . . The economic structure of ancient Rome had nothing in common with the economic structure of our contemporary States, and once this is admitted it is readily understood that the foreign policy of ancient Rome, growing out of a different economic soil, could not have anything in common with the foreign policy of the capitalist States.

"The problem of science is to distinguish one phenomenon from another. General definitions, throwing into one heap completely different phenomena, are of no value from a scientific point of view. One cannot identify the foreign policy of ancient Judea, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, the Medieval Age, and so on, with modern foreign policy. Marx, for instance, did not set himself the task of seeking out general laws for all epochs. He limited himself to the study of the definite laws of capitalist society, and differed in this from many bourgeois scientists aiming at establishing eternal, unchanging laws of economic development. . . .

"From our point of view, imperialism is a special stage in the development of the foreign policy appertaining to a particular economic era. The very word imperialism has only lately made its appearance, and even in the best encyclopedic dictionaries of the beginning of the twentieth century it is not to be found. The word imperialism only began to be used at the beginning of the present century, during the time of the Anglo-Boer war. . . ."

From these words of a well known Marxian it is clear enough that Nearing's fundamental postulate of the problem is closely

related to a definite school of bourgeois historians, but that it is antagonistic to the Marxian school.

#### VIII. PREDICTIONS ON THE BASIS OF THE "PATTERN."

What is the function of the "pattern" in Nearing's scheme? His own answer to our question is in the following words:

"To trace the sequence of events that makes up the imperial pattern and thus to predict, at any stage of the imperial process, the succeeding stages of the same imperial cycle. Without any pretense of finality, it may be fairly asserted that ancient and modern imperial experience dovetails closely in the main outlines." (p. 36).

The answer seems to be clear. But what does it mean concretely? Basing ourselves on Nearing's cycle, we must consider all struggles of oppressed classes and peoples as mere incidents in the pattern, doomed to final frustration in the future as they have been in the past. The only possible ending of imperialism is its final stage of "disintegration and dissolution" which reduces society to its elemental units of self-sufficing village economy, only to begin the eternal cycle all over again.

If the "pattern" is our basis for prediction, then we cannot predict the coming of socialism, we can predict nothing but the eternal recurrence of the pattern. Translated into the terms of Nearing's detailed formula, this means concretely that the present phase of the "imperial cycle" ("conflict for survival"), must pass over into the next phase of "imperial world supremacy" of one power, that is, to super-imperialism. This super-imperialist phase will, according to Nearing, "make the world safe for profit" "Law and order are imposed; roads are built or improved; the land and sea are policed; commerce is encouraged and protected; long-term contracts are lived up to; rents are paid; money is loaned and collected; risks and interest rates are reduced." "The world is divided into a tribute-collecting centre and a tribute-paying circumference."

That is the perspective of modern imperialism, as laid out by the Nearing pattern. It sounds more like the drug-laden dream of Birkenhead-Hoover-Briand than the serious proposition of a "scientific revolutionist" who has set himself the task of overthrowing the system of imperialism. If anyone can believe in this "pattern" as the basis for the perspectives of the future, then he can be a revolutionist only as an act of faith (religious), and not as a matter of scientific conviction, the conviction that the revolutionary Party is itself carrying through the historical process.

Actually, this is nothing but the rationalizing of a petty-bourgeois despair and helplessness, of a complete absence of any understanding of the forces making for the overthrow of imperialism,



for the transformation of the world into a new system of social organization.

Prediction upon the basis of Nearing's scheme, must inevitably postpone the destruction of imperialism to the Greek calends; predictions of a proletarian revolution can only be made by breaking out of the vicious circle of this "pattern."

#### IX. HOW NEARING ESCAPES HIS VICIOUS CIRCLE.

After devoting 162 pages to the elaboration of his "pattern," Nearing proceeds in the remaining 18 pages of his text (the rest of the book consists of "data," quotations from references), to Part III, "The Twilight of the Empires." Here he struggles very hard, in an endeavor to bring forth from his pattern an immediate "Twilight" for imperialism. But in order to do this he is forced to break the pattern. His revolutionary perspectives appear as something entirely disconnected from anything that has gone before.

It is the prime function of any theory of history to explain precisely the great transformation, the turning points, when one system of social relations is transformed into another. It is precisely the fact that dialectical materialism, as developed by Marx and Lenin, really does this, that accounts for its tremendous power as a revolutionary instrument in the hands of the revolutionary class, the proletariat. But Nearing seems to have no inkling of this problem. He solves the problem by making a tremendous "leap" outside the confines of his "pattern." This leap is not a dialectical one; it has not been prepared by everything that went before; it is a violation of the theoretical premises that have been laid; it is a repudiation of everything which was so painstakingly built up in the body of the book.

We have followed the main current of his thought through 168 pages, and everything is made to fall within the "pattern." But the logic has reached its breaking point. The path is at an end. Here you must leap! What is the poor author to do? He jumps—but into the void!

Here is how Nearing makes his leap:

"In each imperial cycle, when expansion is effectively checked; when food supplies, resources, and markets are cut off, the system of economy disintegrates and dissolves back to the level of its most stable units: the agricultural village and the local trading centre. These units are economically self-sufficient; they do not depend upon expansion; they can persist for a long period, almost unchanged, as they have persisted in India and China.

"Once the level of world economy is reached, a new self-sufficient economic unit has been established—a cooperating world. Exploitation at home; class struggles; expansion, conquest and foreign exploitation are eliminated by the establishment of a socialized, co-operative world economy."

Presto, change! The pattern is gone! "The level of world economy is reached!" Imperialism disappears, "eliminated by the establishment of a socialized, co-operative world economy!"

But how did all this happen, what was it that broke the pattern, what brought about this most tremendous transformation of all history? How does it come that the development of world economy, which sharpened the outlines of the "pattern," is at the same time the factor which "eliminates" the "pattern"?

We learn very little indeed of this problem from Nearing, except a few phrases: "The force that effects the transition . . . is the labor movement." "Today the world is passing through this transition stage—the period of the proletarian revolution" (which is not in the pattern!); "Really, there is little choice. The forces of social revolution" (not in the pattern!) "have pushed matters so far that no new, vital society can put on the garments of a system so far decayed and outgrown as capitalist imperialism;" "A successful Soviet economy will drive out capitalist economy as the electric bulb drove out the kerosene lamp," etc., etc.

The last words of the book sum up the mystery, leaving it more mysterious than ever:

"Imperial cycles followed one another so long as the same general productive basis remained at the foundation of society; business for profit within the civil state. With the coming of the machine age" (which is apparently not business for profit within the civil state! E. B.) "the period of the great revolution—history entered a new phase; the race turned a corner, leaving behind civilization and imperialism; moving forward to an era of social production—a world economy; a co-operative society."

It may be unkind, after looking at this entrancing vision, to continue to ask questions of Professor Nearing. But, recovering from our dizziness at this tremendous leap which we have made with him, we attempt to look back and see how we got across this great chasm. "But Professor," we are forced to ask, "didn't you tell us that "the pattern should be more sharply defined in modern times than it was in classical times"? That was hardly a preparation for breaking the pattern entirely at the end, was it? Tell us, confidentially, what really were the tremendous forces which could carry us over the logical chasm? We go back over the preceding pages, trying to find the missing link!

Here it is, back on page 130, where we had passed it unnoticed on first reading, because it seemed to be merely one of the many digressions from the main thought, or a variation of the pattern: "*Machine production laid the foundation for a new form of social life . . . The machine production world was actually a new kind of a world.*"

Exactly, Professor, the machine-production world is a world

entirely different from all worlds that went before. And therefore all your 25 years of labor in trying to find the "imperial pattern" from all the old worlds, in order to explain the new world and predict its course of development, was just so much labor lost.

#### X. WHAT IS THE "PATTERN" WORTH?

Nearing has labored hard, and brought the fruits of his labor as an offering to the revolution. What shall we say of the gift?

Ungracious as it may seem, the gift must be refused. For the revolution, the "pattern" is worth precisely nothing, and even Nearing had to discard it in order to be able to bring his book to an end. On the other hand, it may very easily—in fact will almost surely—be used as an instrument to throw confusion among the workers, especially among those who are untrained in scientific thinking, and who are impressed with the prestige of Nearing's long record as scholar and teacher. Our revolutionary theory, given us by many generations of working class experience and the titanic contributions of Marx and Lenin, is the most precious possession of our revolutionary world Party. It is our basic arsenal of weapons. It is the heavy artillery which will destroy the walls of capitalist imperialism. It is this, our most valuable and valued possession, which Nearing proposes to substitute with his hodge-podge wastebasket full of the sweeping of bourgeois universities. Firmly, and without too much gentleness, the gift must be returned to the donor.