Introduction: 120 Million Children
in the Eye of the Hurricane

The division of labor among nations is that some specialize in winning and others in losing. Our part of the world, known today as Latin America, was precocious: it has specialized in losing ever since those remote times when Renaissance Europeans ventured across the ocean and buried their teeth in the throats of the Indian civilizations. Centuries passed, and Latin America perfected its role. We are no longer in the era of marvels when face surpassed fable and imagination was shamed by the trophies of conquest—the lodes of gold, the mountains of silver. But our region still works as a menial. It continues to exist at the service of others' needs, as a source and reserve of oil and iron, of copper and meat, of fruit and coffee, the raw materials and foods destined for rich countries which profit more from consuming them than Latin America does from producing them. The taxes collected by the buyers are much higher than the prices received by the sellers; and after all, as Alliance for Progress coordinator Covey T. Oliver said in July 1968, to speak of fair prices is a "medieval" concept, for we are in the era of free trade.

The more freedom is extended to business, the more prisons have to be built for those who suffer from that business. Our inquisitor-hang-man systems function not only for the dominating external markets; they also provide gushers of profit from foreign loans and investments.
in the dominated internal markers. Back in 1913, President Woodrow Wilson observed: "You hear of 'concessions' to foreign capitalists in Latin America. You do not hear of concessions to foreign capitalists in the United States. They are not granted concessions." He was confident; "States that are obliged ... to grant concessions are in this condition, that foreign interests are apt to dominate their domestic affairs. . . .," he said, and he was right. Along the way we have even lost the right to call ourselves Americans, although the Haitians and the Cubans appeared in history as new people a century before the Mayflower pilgrims settled on the Plymouth coast. For the world today, America is just the United States; the region we inhabit is a sub-America, a second-class America of nebulous identity.

Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European—or later United States—capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources. Production methods and class structure have been successively determined from outside for each area by meshing it into the universal gearbox of capitalism. To each area has been assigned a function, always for the benefit of the foreign metropolis of the moment, and the endless chain of dependency has been endlessly extended. The chain has many more than two links. In Latin America it also includes the oppression of small countries by their larger neighbors and, within each country's frontiers, the exploitation by big cities and ports of their internal sources of food and labor. (Four centuries ago sixteen of today's twenty biggest Latin American cities already existed.)

For those who see history as a competition, Latin America's backwardness and poverty are merely the result of its failure. We lost; others won. But the winners happen to have won thanks to our losing: the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is, as someone has said, an integral part of the history of world capitalism's development. Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others—the empires and their native overseers. In the colonial and neocolonial alchemy, gold changes into scrap metal and food into poison. Potosi, Zacatecas, and Ouro Preto became desolate warrens of deep, empty tunnels from which the
precious metals had been taken; ruin was the fate of Chile's nitrate pampas and of Amazonia's rubber forests. Northeast Brazil's sugar and Argentina's quebracho belts, and communities around oil-rich Lake Maracaibo, have become painfully aware of the mortality of wealth which nature bestows and imperialism appropriates. The rain that irrigates the centers of imperialist power drowns the vast suburbs of the system. In the same way, and symmetrically, the well-being of our dominating classes—dominating inwardly, dominated from outside—is the curse of our multitudes condemned to exist as beasts of burden.

The gap widens. Around the middle of the last century the world's rich countries enjoyed a 50 percent higher living standard than the poor countries. Development develops inequality: in April 1969 Richard Nixon told the Organization of American States (OAS) that by the end of the twentieth century the United States' per capita income would be fifteen times higher than Latin America's. The strength of the imperialist system as a whole rests on the necessary inequality of its pares, and this inequality assumes ever more dramatic dimensions. The oppressor countries get steadily richer in absolute terms—and much more so in relative terms—through the dynamic of growing disparity. The capitalist "head office" can allow itself the luxury of creating and believing its own myths of opulence, but the poor countries on the capitalist periphery know that myths cannot be eaten. The United States citizen's average income is seven times that of a Latin American and grows ten times faster. And averages are deceptive in view of the abyss that yawns between the many poor and the rich few south of the Rio Grande. According to the United Nations, the amount shared by 6 million Latin Americans at the top of the social pyramid is the same as the amount shared by 140 million at the bottom. There are 60 million *campesinos* whose fortune amounts to $.25 a day. At the other extreme, the pimps of misery accumulate $5 billion in their private Swiss or U.S. bank accounts. Adding insult to injury, they squander in sterile ostentation and luxury, and in unproductive investments constituting no less than half the total investment, the capital that Latin America could devote to the replacement, extension, and generation of job-creating means of production. Harnessed as they have always been to the constellation of imperialist power, our ruling classes have no interest whatsoever in determining whether patriotism might not prove more profitable than
treason, and whether begging is really the only formula for international policies. Sovereignty is mortgaged because "there's no other way." The oligarchies' cynical alibis confuse the impotence of a social class with the presumed empty destinies of their countries.