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Imperialism

Marx's anti-colonialism, new sub-imperialisms and consistent internationalism in a bipolar world

- Features -

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Over the past century, the term imperialism has been used to define different situations and, at times, been replaced by concepts such as globalisation and hegemony. Does the concept of imperialism remain valid and, if so, how do you define it?

Imperialism, which involves economic, political and/or cultural domination of one nation by another for profit and political advantage, remains a valid concept. But imperialism has changed a lot since the early 1900s, when the term first started to be used widely on the left to refer to an outgrowth of colonialism. For example, there are very few direct colonies today: France has New Caledonia and some colonies in the Caribbean; Israel basically treats the Palestinian territories as a colony; and Russia has invaded and occupies parts of Ukraine. But it is quite rare today. Most of Latin America became politically independent in the early 19th century, while in the period of decolonisation after World War II imperialist rule in Africa and Asia also became largely indirect. The normal way imperialism operates today is by supporting people such as General [Abdel Fattah al-]Sisi in Egypt, the various military regimes that existed in Latin America in the 1970-80s, the former South African apartheid regime, etcetera.

A second difference is that in Lenin's and Rosa Luxemburg's time, there were four or five imperialist powers, each roughly equal in power and all competing against each other. By the end of World War II, however, the world was divided into two large blocs: one led by the Soviet Union; the other by the US. Then, with the Soviet Union's collapse [in 1991], US hegemony seemed relatively uncontested. But now with China's rise and Russia recovering its power (to a certain extent), we seem once again to be heading towards two blocs: one composed of the US, the European Union, Britain and Japan; the other of China, Russia and, to some extent, Iran. So, there have definitely been shifts and changes since Lenin and Luxemburg's time.

Despite this, discussions regarding imperialism often still refer back to Lenin. Which parts of his writings on the subject remain useful or relevant today?

One of the great things about Lenin's book is his idea of stages of capitalism. For Lenin, this involved not just a gradual evolution from one stage to another but a transformation into opposites. We saw this with the rise of monopoly capital and the transformation of competition into monopoly (the negation of competition). We also saw this after the Great Depression, when capitalism entered the stage of state capitalism. This, among other things, saw the transformation of the Russian Revolution into its opposite. During this stage we also had Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany and US president Franklin D. Roosevelt initiating a more benign form of state capitalism. Lenin's notion that capitalism — as a whole, and not just in one country — goes through stages is a very useful way of thinking.

So too is his idea that imperialism is tied to capitalism. This is not to deny the various ideological factors at play, such as national pride, but the underlying motivations of markets, cheap labour and natural resources help explain

imperialism. Often both factors — economic and ideological — can be true at the same time. World War I technically started over a nationalist grievance in the Balkans. But, as Lenin explained, an underlying motive was the quest to divide up what remained of the Ottoman Empire and other areas of the world.

Luxemburg wrote that once Europeans had occupied most of the Global South by the 1880s and '90s, there was nowhere left to expand. This meant the only way capital could expand was by going after each other, leading Luxemburg to predict the war earlier than almost anybody. So, the theory of imperialism is also useful for explaining wars.

Though he was writing before the concept became common on the left, is there anything useful in Marx's writing for understanding imperialism and anti-imperialism today?

When Marx was writing, it was still called colonialism. At the time, much of the world was not yet dominated by colonialism, though the French were in North Africa, the British were in India, etc. Edward Said has noted, in a rather polemical way, that Marx initially held certain sympathies for colonialism and what he saw as technological progress being brought to the colonies. This problematic view was clearly expressed in the Communist Manifesto, where he and Friedrich Engels talk about how colonialism “batters down all Chinese walls” and “draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation”.

It is worth noting that while Lenin wrote about imperialism at a high level of abstraction — focusing on finance capital, monopoly capitalism, global markets — Marx focused his intensive studies on the internal structures and dynamics of colonialism. Two areas of particular interest were: the potentially revolutionary consequences of agrarian societies transitioning towards capitalism (most of the world at that time was composed of agrarian societies with rural peasant and agricultural labouring majorities); and whether any kind of alliance could be struck between movements in those societies and the workers' movement in the West. These studies led Marx to gradually shift away from his quite ethnocentric and eurocentric views, so that by the 1860s and '70s he became a strong supporter of anti-colonial movements in general.

Marx started writing about India early on in his career, a topic he kept returning to throughout his life. But he also wrote a lot about Poland and Ireland, which were two different types of colonies. In the case of Poland, nobody could claim Russia was bringing progress: it was not building railroads or modernising the economy — it was outright reactionary colonialism. As for Ireland, it was a rehearsal for what the British did later in many other parts of the world. Marx dedicated part of a chapter in *Capital* to colonialism in Ireland as a uniquely capitalist form of colonialism, one that does not simply extract but also uproots the social conditions of the population.

In contrast to India, where he early on expressed ambivalence toward colonialism, Marx gave strong support to the anti-colonialist movement in Poland and Ireland from pretty early on. The difference was that there were many socialists and left-wingers in the Polish and Irish nationalist movements, which had links to the First International through their respective branches in those countries. In India, however, the movement's goals in the 1850s were centred on restoring the old Mughal Empire and lacked any modern political perspective. The same was true in China.

Despite this, Marx and Engels supported the gigantic 1857 uprising in India and a year later Marx would write to Engels that “India is now our best ally.” By “our” he meant him, Engels and the small number of people who remained dedicated to socialist revolution amid the era of conservative reaction after the defeat of the 1848 revolution. Marx could see that, while there was not much doing in Europe, India was exploding in resistance to the British Empire, which was a big part of the global capitalist system back then.

As you noted, after the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War, world politics seemed completely dominated by US imperialism. In recent years, however, a shift seems to be taking place. While the US has withdrawn from Afghanistan, we have seen Russia invade Ukraine, China's rise and even nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, among others, deploy military power beyond their borders. How do you view current dynamics within global capitalism?

The world appears to be once again heading towards two blocs, reproducing something akin to what we had during the Cold War. On one hand we have Russia and China, who on certain issues are joined by India, Brazil and South Africa [the other main countries within BRICS]. If the US and Israel keep threatening Iran, it is likely to be drawn closer to this bloc. Either way, this is a pretty large bloc that is quite powerful economically, even if it is not completely united.

On the other hand, we have the EU, the US, Japan and Britain, which are more united though they have their issues too. Relative to other countries, the US is still a towering economy and, at least on paper, its military apparatus is multiple times the size of all the others put together. While the US' economy is not exactly declining, it is certainly not growing as rapidly as China's or India's. The trend is therefore for the US to become less important as a global economic player. It is not about to collapse, but it is definitely getting weaker.

One thing I would say is that when I first came around the left in the '60s and '70s, there were Maoists and people around Monthly Review who even back then were predicting the US' collapse. But then neoliberalism came and the Soviet Union collapsed instead, leaving the US riding high again for a while. So I think it is important to say that the US is in a slow and relative decline, but that we do not yet know where all this is going.

If we look inside the US, we can see that there is a lot of resentment over its weakness and the fact it keeps losing wars, something that Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" tries to tap into. It is one thing to go into Iraq and be defeated; it is another thing to be driven out of Afghanistan by the Taliban after spending hundreds of billions of dollars, only to have the whole government collapse in a week, leaving you barely enough time to get your troops out.

Afghanistan is also interesting in that it demonstrates that not all forms of anti-imperialism are progressive. The Taliban is an incredibly retrogressive force, even compared with other Islamist or Islamic fundamentalist groups. The Taliban is in the league of its own. So, it is important to remember that some anti-imperialist movements can be reactionary.

Something new that we face today is the emergence of powers that we could call sub-imperialist. Iran is an example of this: for the past 10 years, Iran has been backing forces all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. These forces play a key part in the Israel-Palestine war, in Lebanon, and in Syria, where the regime is almost completely dependent on Iran. Iranian allies have shut off a good part of shipping through the Red Sea in solidarity with Palestinians. So, Iran is a pretty powerful sub-imperialist power in the region. India is also sub-imperialist, as is Brazil, which throws its weight around Latin America quite a bit. South Africa is weaker now, but there was a time when it too exercised certain hegemony over large parts of Africa as a sub-imperialist power.

So, the world may be multipolar, in that we have all these different sub-imperialisms, but the trend in the past 10 years has been towards a coalescence of two large blocs. In this sense, the world is becoming less multipolar and more bipolar.

Could you clarify what you mean by sub-imperialist, as it is often used to refer to different things?

Saudi Arabia is a classic example of sub-imperialism: were it not for US support, the entire regime would probably

collapse. Saudi Arabia is “sub” in the sense that almost everything they do abroad is in league with the US — it is an imperialism that is subordinate to US imperialism.

Iran, on the other hand, is certainly not Russia or China's cat's paw; it is quite independent. But I also consider it sub-imperialist because it operates only within a certain region. So, I use sub-imperialist in two different, and not entirely compatible, senses: when dealing with a power operating as an adjunct of a large imperialist power; and when dealing with a regional power that is not strong enough to be a player on the global stage.

How do you view China and Russia fitting into the global imperialist system today? Would they fall into the category of sub-imperialist or imperialist?

People argue over whether Russia and China are imperialist. Some on the left seem to think the only imperialist countries are the US and the old imperial powers of the pre-World War II era. China and Russia themselves too often try to reclaim some of the old anti-imperialist language when opposing the US. But this wears rather thin when we look at how Russia operates in Ukraine or how China operates in Africa.

What would you call Russia's domination in Eastern Europe if not imperialist? Today, Russia has a military presence not just in the former post-Soviet region but in Syria, Libya, and parts of Africa, through the presence of the Wagner Group [a Russian-state backed private military company]. Even though its power is mainly regional, Russia can be classified as an imperialist power. Though everyone likes to point out how weak Russia is compared to what it was — which is true in terms of its economy — Russia is still the world's second nuclear power. This is politically important.

China does not have the same kind of relationship with other countries, in which it dominates them to the same extent. But they are certainly moving in that direction in Southeast Asia — from Myanmar/Burma all the way to Indonesia. This has created tremendous anxiety because the Pacific has for a long time been a US and French imperialist lake. That is one reason why the French are reacting so harshly in New Caledonia — they worry that if the indigenous population get more political power, they could align with China to some degree.

While China's military is not really that developed, it is capable of threatening Taiwan and the Philippines, and jockeying for power in the region. Every once in a while, China gets into border disputes with India. But China seems to put more energy into the Belt and Road Initiative, investing in Africa, and so forth. Perhaps they are waiting until they get enough military power to really contend with the US. So, China today is more an economic than political or military power.

Russia and China are the two big contenders to the US, but it is important to note that they have their own internal weaknesses and problems too, which they try to hide through authoritarian controls. If they are unable to deliver a higher standard of living to their population (or at least maintain the current level), they will find themselves facing the same problems causing instability in the US.

A further issue is that despite tensions, the economies of the US and China are more integrated than ever. How then should we understand these tensions?

Over the past 120 years we have learnt that economic integration is no guarantor of peace and stability. Look at how integrated Europe was on eve of World War I, yet that did not stop them launching into a vicious, brutal war against each other. At the peak era of globalisation, there was some recycling of this idea. [Former US President] Bill Clinton said things like “trade has replaced war.” But it was never going to last.

With the decline or stagnation of Western economies, politicians everywhere are riling up nationalist sentiments. Brexit was probably the most dramatic example of this kind of right-wing economic nationalism. But we have seen it in the US, where support for globalisation may have been stronger on the two coasts, but was always far weaker in the Midwestern industrial area. We are also seeing it in France, where the far right is on the rise. In India, [Narendra] Modi came to power on an anti-Muslim, anti-Dalit, Hindu fundamentalist program, but he also promised an economic miracle for India. When that did not come about, he doubled down on his communalism. Even in China, which maintained an economic growth rate above 10% for a long time but is now seeing its growth slow down, the regime is striking more of a nationalist chord to justify political crackdowns.

In the context of this increasingly bipolar world, and taking into consideration that local movements will have different powers as their principal enemy and might therefore seek support from their enemy's rivals, do you see possibilities for building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles internationally? What should 21st-century socialist anti-imperialism look like?

Let us start with Palestine. There is a brutal colonial war in which one side has so much more armaments and military capacity than the other. There is just nothing like it in the world today. We have to support the Palestinians. But this does not mean giving political support to Hamas. In Palestine, there is a broad nationalist movement, of which Hamas is part. It is true that the dominant wing in Palestinian nationalism right now (Hamas) is more conservative. But that is not what we need to be emphasising. We need to be emphasising solidarity on a broader level with the Palestinian movement and against the ongoing genocide.

One way the more revolutionary and independent section of the anti-imperialist movement can do this is by being consistent in supporting both Palestine and Ukraine. My newest book, *A Political Sociology of Twenty-First Century Revolutions and Resistances*, is a collection of essays I have written over the past 15 years. The essays on Palestine and Ukraine have been grouped under the topic "Struggling for national existence", because in both cases we have peoples facing off against a genocidal imperialism.

A lot of people think genocide necessarily means mass death. But genocide means destroying a people through a combination of military, economic and cultural control. If you look at the areas of Ukraine under Russian control, it is clear that is Russia's plan. Russia does not regard Ukrainians as a separate people with the right to a separate national identity. The genocidal intent in Israel's actions are also very clear. Of course, there are differences within the Israeli dominant class: some want to do this more slowly through attrition, while others want to do it more suddenly. The fascist elements in the Netanyahu government would like to immediately drive Palestinians out of the West Bank and Gaza and across the border into Jordan and Egypt. But the intentions remain the same.

And if we are going to talk about genocide in Ukraine and Palestine, we should also talk about Sudan. While Sudan is not a centrally-directed genocide, it is a civil war between two-warlord type groups that has left millions of people on the verge of starvation. Sub-imperialist countries are involved in arming both sides. Meanwhile, the popular committees that emerged during the uprising five years ago still exist and are working to alleviate the suffering among the population.

To be universal and consistent we should also show solidarity with the Kanaks in New Caledonia, and support Venezuela and Cuba versus US imperialism. We should also pay attention to ethnic oppression, for example of the Kurds and the Baluchis in Iran. People do not pay enough attention to this, but it is a kind of internal colonialism involving harsh rule over areas that have aspirations to at least some level of autonomy.

By being consistent, the democratic and anti-Stalinist elements of the left can distinguish themselves from the kind of anti-imperialism that thinks everything is about the US and sees regimes such as Iran's as allies. While being critical of the US and its allies, we have to be critical of the Russian regime, the Iranian regime, and so forth.

One final point: people often say, "Oh, you are anti-imperialist? You must like the kinds of regimes in anti-imperialist countries then," which is a rehash of what we faced during the Cold War. But many also want to know what our positive agenda is. During the Cold War, if you came out in favour of Czechoslovakia [against the Soviet invasion] and the French student-worker revolutionary movement in 1968, you were providing some elements of a vision of a new society. You were saying: "I am a radical anti-capitalist, but what I have in mind is more like what they are trying to do in socialist humanist Czechoslovakia than the centralised Soviet state capitalist model." It clarified the positive goal of a movement, which is very important.

So, our movement cannot just be anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist; it has to be socialist — I would say socialist humanist — and put forward some idea about a different way of life. That is why, as well as being consistent, we need to highlight movements that have a liberatory aspect, such as the popular committees in Sudan, the Kurds in Rojava, etc. These are forces with a progressive and, in some cases, anti-capitalist or have a socialist orientation. They need the strongest support

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