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Economy

# Imperialism in the 21st century

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**The renewal of interest in the study of imperialism has changed the debate on globalisation, previously centred exclusively on the critique of neo-liberalism and on the new features of globalisation. A concept developed by the main Marxist theorists of the 20th century - which enjoyed a wide diffusion in the 1970s - has again attracted the attention of analysts because of the aggravation of the social crisis of the Third World, the multiplication of armed conflicts and the deadly competition among countries.**

The notion of imperialism conceptualises two types of problem: on the one hand, the relations of domination in operation between the capitalists of the centre and the peoples of the periphery and on the other the links which prevail between the great imperialist powers at each stage of capitalism. What is the contemporary relevance of this theory? To what extent can it contribute towards clarifying contemporary reality?

## **An explanation of global polarisation**

The polarization of incomes confirms the importance of the theory in its first sense. While the wealth of three multimillionaires exceeds the GDP of 48 nations and a person on the periphery dies of hunger every four seconds, it is difficult to ignore the widening of the gap between the advanced and underdeveloped countries. Today nobody could believe that this asymmetry is a temporary phenomenon, to be ultimately corrected by the benefits of globalisation. The peripheral countries are not simply the "losers" from globalisation; they are also subjected to an intensification of the transfers of income that have historically held back their development.

This drainage has led to the intensification of extreme poverty in the 49 poorest nations and major deformations of partial accumulation in the dependent semi-industrialized countries. In this second case, the prosperity of those sectors inserted in the international division of labour is bought at the expense of those economic activities centred on the internal market.

The analysis of imperialism does not offer a conspiracy theory of underdevelopment nor does it absolve the local governments of responsibility for this situation. It simply presents an explanation of the polarization of accumulation on a world scale and the reduction of the possibility of its evening out among different economies. The accelerated margin of development which in the 19th century allowed Germany and Japan to acquire the status of great power, held until then by France or Great Britain no longer exists today for Brazil, India or Korea. The map of the world thus modelled is characterized by a 'stable architecture' of the centre and a 'variable geography' of underdevelopment, the only possible modifications being those of the peripheral status of each dependent country. [\[1\]](#)

The theory of imperialism attributes these asymmetries to the systematic transfer of the value created in the periphery towards the capitalists of the centre. This transfer is concretised through the deterioration of the terms of trade, the extraction of financial resources and the transfer of industrial profits. The political effect of this drainage is the loss of the political autonomy of the peripheral ruling classes and the increasing level of US military intervention. These three aspects of contemporary imperialism can be clearly observed in the reality of Latin America today.

## **The contradictions of the peripheral economies**

Since the mid 1990s, Latin America has suffered the consequences of the collapse of the 'emergent markets'. Most of the nations affected have suffered sharp crises, preceded by the flight of capital and followed by devaluations that have strengthened inflation and reduced purchasing power. These crises have led to banking failures and the subsequent state bailouts have worsened the public debt, rendering any policies of reflation more difficult and accentuating the loss of monetary and fiscal sovereignty.

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Capping the black gold in a Kuwaiti oilfield

These crises stem from imperialist domination and not merely from the implementation of neo-liberal policies, since the latter have also been applied in the countries of the centre. The collapses in the Latin American periphery are much deeper than the disequilibria observed in the US, Europe or Japan, for they are characterized by periodic crises in the prices of raw materials exported, the periodic cessation of debt payments and the disarticulation of local industry. The periphery is more vulnerable in the face of international financial turbulence, for its economic cycle depends on the level of activity of the advanced economies. Nonetheless, the advance of globalisation has accentuated this fragility by deepening the segmentation of industrial activity, by concentrating qualified labour in the countries of the centre and by widening the differences in levels of consumption.

Imperialist domination allows the developed economies to transfer a part of their own disequilibria to the dependent countries. This transfer explains the asymmetric and non-generalized character of the current international recession. Although a crisis equivalent to that of the 1930s has already taken place in the periphery, such a situation is only one of the possibilities for the centre. The same policies of privatisation have not led to the same losses in every region. Thatcherism increased poverty in Britain, but in Argentina it has led to malnutrition and immiseration; the widening of the gap in incomes has reduced wages in the US, but in Mexico it leads to poverty and massive emigration; opening up to free trade has weakened the Japanese economy but has devastated Ecuador. These differences stem from the structurally central or peripheral character of each country in the world order.

Dependence is the main cause of the great regression in Latin America since the mid 1990s, despite the brief respite generated by the influx of hot capital. The region is reverting to the crisis situation of the 'lost decade' of the 1980s. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the region stagnated around 0.3% last year and will be around 0.5% in 2002. After four years of net outflow of capital foreign investment has dried up and productive specialization in basic activities has ensured the deterioration of the trade balance (in numerous countries the sums remitted by emigrants to the US already exceed the currency earnings generated by exports). The result of this crisis: only 20 out of the 120 stocks of Latin American companies which were quoted on the world stock exchanges 10 years ago are still trading today.

Imperialist domination is at the origin of the big economic disequilibria that have led to the trade deficit (Mexico), the loss of fiscal control (Brazil) or the depression of production (Argentina). Currently these upheavals have provoked a succession of crises that have spread across the Southern Cone, destabilizing the Uruguayan economy and threatening Peru and Brazil. The neo-liberal economists try to analyse the particularities of this crisis, not understanding the general rule of these disequilibria. Ignoring imperialist oppression, they have a tendency to change their opinions frequently and to denigrate with an extraordinary rapidity the economic models they previously lauded.

But since the launch of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), it has become practically impossible to avoid the analysis of imperialism. This strategic project of domination seeks the expansion of US exports to block European competition and consolidate US control over all the lucrative transactions of the region (the remaining privatisations, privileged contracts in the public sector, payment of patents).

The FTAA is a neo-colonial treaty that imposes 'free trade' on Latin America without any counterpart from the US. To obtain 'fast track' authorization (permission from Congress to negotiate rapid agreements with each country without

referring back to the legislature), Bush recently introduced new clauses which block the transfer of high technologies to Latin America and which hinder the entry of 293 regional products to the US market. These customs barriers relate primarily to steel, textile and agricultural products. Moreover, Bush is committed to an aid programme for agriculture that, in the course of the next decade, will deal a deathblow to Latin American exports of soya, wheat and maize. [2]

The FTAA typifies the imperialist doubletalk that consists in preaching free trade to others while practicing protectionism itself. The signature of the agreement would provoke the collapse of the more industrialized countries like Brazil and the regional associations like Mercosur. After a decade of neo-liberalism, the imperialist message of free trade no longer convinces anybody. It is obvious that the prosperity of a country depends in no way on its 'global presence', but rather the modalities of its insertion. For example, foreign trade as a proportion of GDP is much higher in Africa (45.6%) than is the case with Europe (13.8 %) or the US (13.2%) although it is the poorest region of the planet. [3] This extreme case of unfavourable subordination in the international division of labour illustrates a situation of general dependence which afflicts the peripheral economies.

## Political recolonisation

The recolonisation of the periphery constitutes the political face of imperialist economic domination. It is based on the growing association of the local dominant classes with their northern equivalents. This intertwining is the consequence of financial dependence, the surrender of natural resources and the privatisation of strategic sectors in the region. The loss of economic sovereignty has given the International Monetary Fund (IMF) a direct grip over macro-economic management and the US State Department a similar influence on political decisions. Today no Latin American president would dare to take any significant decision without consulting the US Embassy. The preaching of the 'Americanised' media and intellectuals contributes to the legitimisation of this subordination.

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Unlike the period 1940-1970, Latin American capitalists no longer envisage strengthening the internal markets through import substitution. Their priority is to link up with foreign companies, for the regional dominant class is also partially a creditor of the foreign debt and has benefited from financial deregulation, privatisation and the deregulation of labour. There is also a layer of civil servants that is more faithful to the imperialist organisms than the national states. Educated in US universities, tied up with the international bodies and the big companies, their careers are more dependent on these institutions than on the effective functioning of the states they govern.

However, this generalized recolonisation also accentuates the crisis of the region's political systems. The loss of legitimacy of the governments under IMF orders has led in the last two years to a crisis of regime in four countries (Paraguay, Ecuador, Peru and Argentina). Following a long process of erosion of the authority of the traditional parties, the governments are growing fragile, the regimes tend to disintegrate and some states are decaying. This sequence completes the hollowing out of the institutions, which have ceased to be responsive to popular needs and which act like agents of imperialism. To the extent that the constitutional façade is disintegrating the US State Department encourages a return to the dictatorial practices of the past, although the old authoritarianism is concealed by new constitutional artifices.

This line was clearly apparent in the recent attempted coup in Venezuela. The replacement of the nationalist government of this country is a priority for the US government so as to strengthen the embargo against Cuba, undermine Zapatism, prepare for an electoral victory of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil and teach a lesson to the Argentine popular rebellion. US diplomacy has already begun to evaluate the possibility of restoring the old protectorates in what it considers to be 'failed states'.

# Military interventionism

Colombia and Haiti are the two main candidates for this neocolonial rehearsal, which could also be implemented in practice in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sierra Leone. Recently Argentina has begun to figure among the nations included in this project of vice-regal administration. [4] Such alternatives would involve a significant direct intervention by the US.

'Plan Colombia' is the main test run for this bellicose intervention in Latin America. The Pentagon has already put aside the pretext of the narcotics trade and by forcing the end of the peace negotiations has initiated a military campaign against the guerrillas. The decision to minimize the direct presence of US troops, to reduce US losses (the 'Vietnam syndrome'), leads to greater bloodshed among the 'natives'.

The war in Colombia is about restoring the authority of a dismembered state and restoring the conditions of imperialist appropriation of strategic resources. As shown by the conspiracy in Venezuela, these actions are also intended to guarantee US oil supplies. To ensure these supplies the CIA has also set up a strategic centre in Ecuador and has set up listening posts capable of covering the entire territory of Mexico.

Imperialism is committed to the modernization of its military bases with rapid mobility forces. With this in view it has decentralized the old Panamanian command installing new bases in Vieques, Mantas, Aruba and El Salvador. Through a network of 51 installations across the planet, US troops are carrying out exercises that involve the simultaneous mobilization in the course of a few days of a force of 60,000 soldiers in 100 countries. [5] Aggression against Cuba, through terrorist sabotage or a renewed plan of invasion, remains an ever-present objective.

This bellicose course has deepened since September 11, 2001, for the US is gambling on the reactivation of its economy through rearmament and envisages potential wars against Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Syria and Libya. With 5% of the world population, the US now accounts for 40% of total military spending and has just begun the modernization of its submarines, the construction of new planes and the testing, through the 'star wars' programme, of new applications of information technologies.

Military aggression is the imperialist response to the disintegration of states, peripheral economies and societies, provoked by the growing US domination over this periphery. That is why the current 'war on terror' has some similarities with old colonial campaigns. Again, the enemy is demonised to justify the massacres of the civilian population on the front line and restrictions on democratic rights in the homeland. However, the more the destruction of the 'terrorist' enemy advances, the more one witnesses a political and social dislocation. The generalized state of war perpetuates the instability provoked by economic pillage, political balkanisation and the social destruction of the periphery. [6]

These effects are most visible in Latin America and the Middle East, two zones of strategic importance for the Pentagon since they possess oil resources and represent important disputed markets for European and Japanese competition. Because of this strategic importance they are at the centre of imperialist domination and endure very similar processes of state disarticulation, economic weakening of the local dominant class and the loss of authority of their traditional modes of political representation.

# Neo-liberal fatalism

Economic expropriation, political recolonisation and military interventionism are the three pillars of the current

imperialism. Some analysts limit themselves to describing this oppression as an inexorable destiny, in a resigned manner. Some present the fracture between 'winners and losers' of globalisation as a 'cost of development', without explaining why this price persists over time and is still being charged to those nations who have already paid it in the past.

The neo-liberals tend to prognosticate that the end of underdevelopment will happen in those countries that gamble on 'attracting' foreign capital and the 'seduction' of companies. However, the dependent nations who have entered on this road in the past decade by opening their economies up are now paying the heaviest price in the 'emergent crises'. Those who were the most committed to privatisation have lost most on the world market. In providing every facility to imperialist capital, they have lifted the barriers that limited the pillage of their natural resources and they are paying for it today by more asymmetrical trade exchanges, growing financial instability and a sharpened industrial disarticulation.

Some neo-liberals attribute these effects to the limited application of their recommendations, as if a decade of negative experiences had not furnished enough lessons as to the result of their recipes. Others suggest that underdevelopment is a consequence of the temperamental inadequacies of the population of the periphery, the weight of corruption or the cultural immaturity of the peoples of the Third World. In general, the colonialist argument has changed style, but its content remains invariable. Today the superiority of the conquerors is no longer justified by their racial purity, but by their superior knowledge and patterns of behaviour.

## Imperial trans-nationalisation

In arguing that globalisation dilutes the frontiers between the First and Third World, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt [\[7\]](#) mount a serious challenge to the theory of imperialism. They believe that a new global capital acting through the UN, the G8, the IMF and the WTO (World Trade Organization) has created an imperial sovereignty, linking the dominant fractions of the centre and the periphery in one system of world oppression.

This characterization supposes the existence of a certain homogenisation of capitalist development, which seems very difficult to verify. All the data concerning investment, saving or consumption confirms on the contrary the amplification of differences between the central and peripheral economies and shows that the processes of accumulation and crisis are also polarizing. The US prosperity of the last decade contrasts with the generalized crisis of the underdeveloped nations, while the social crisis of the periphery has for the moment no equivalent in Europe. In the same way there is no sign of a convergence in the status of the US and Venezuelan bourgeoisie, nor of a similarity between the Argentine and Japanese crisis. Far from uniformising the reproduction of capital around a common horizon, globalisation deepens the duality of this process on the planetary scale.

It is clear that the association between the dominant classes of the periphery and the big companies is a closer one, as it is clear that poverty is spreading at the heart of advanced capitalism. But these processes have not transformed any dependent country into a central one, nor have they brought about the Third Worldisation of any central power. The greater interlinking between the dominant classes coexists with the consolidation of the historic gap that separates the developed from the underdeveloped countries. Capitalism does not level out differences, nor does it fracture around a new trans-national axis; it rather strengthens the growing polarization which appeared in the preceding century.

The power held by the capitalists of about 20 nations over the other 200 is the main evidence of the persistence of the hierarchical organization of the world market. Through the UN Security Council, they exercise a military domination, through the WTO they impose their trade hegemony and through the IMF they ensure the financial

control of the planet.

In analysing the predominant links between the dominant classes, the trans-nationalist thesis confuses 'association' and 'sharing of power'. The fact that a sector of the capitalist groups of the periphery is increasing its integration with its allies in the centre does not mean it is sharing in world domination and does not suppress its structural weakness. While US companies exploit Latin American workers, the Ecuadorian or Brazilian bourgeoisie does not participate in the expropriation of the US proletariat. Although the leap recorded in the internationalisation of the economy is very significant, capital continues to operate within the framework of the imperialist order that establishes a fracture between centre and periphery.

## Classes and states - I

Some writers argue that the trans-nationalisation of capital extends to classes and to states, thus creating a new structure of global domination that cuts across all countries and social strata. [\[8\]](#)

This thesis identifies the process of regional integration with social and state 'trans-nationalisation', without perceiving the qualitative difference that separates the association between imperialist groups and the recolonisation of the periphery. The European Union and the FTAA, for example, are not part of the same tendency towards 'trans-nationalisation' but are the expressions of two very different processes. We should not confuse an alliance between dominant sectors on the world market and the neo-colonial plan of a given power.

In reality, only the higher bureaucracy of the peripheral countries who also belong to the international organisms constitutes a fully 'trans-nationalised' social group. The loyalty of this sector towards the IMF or the WTO is stronger than that they feel towards the national states that they lead and it might be thought that the behaviour and perspectives of these functionaries anticipate the future course of the dominant classes of the Third World. But such an evolution constitutes at most a possibility and does not represent today a verifiable reality, in particular in the countries of the higher periphery (like Brazil or South Korea), where the dominant class is more linked to processes of accumulation dependent on internal markets. The situation is totally different in the smaller countries (for example in central America) which are highly integrated in the market of a great power. These differences refute the existence of a general or uniform process of trans-nationalisation.

Some defenders of the imperial thesis affirm that the degree of effective unity between the central and peripheral classes is greater than allowed for by the obsolete parameters of national accountabilities. It is true that these categories are already insufficient to evaluate the current course of globalisation but they are accompanied by other undeniable indicators of the fracture between centre and periphery. The deepening of these inequalities can be seen at every level of productivity, of income, consumption or accumulation.

It is on the other hand false to suppose that the 'new global State' has erased the distinction between dominant and recolonised states. This difference leaps to the eyes when one sees the influence of the bourgeoisies of the Third World on the decisions of the UN, IMF and WTO or the World Bank. The dominant classes of the periphery are not the victims of underdevelopment and profit greatly through exploiting the workers of their own countries. But this does not bring them any closer to world domination.

The thesis of Empire ignores this marginal role and underestimates the persistence of imperialist domination in the strategic sectors of the periphery. It does not acknowledge that this subjection is not currently purely colonial, nor is it centred exclusively on the appropriation of raw materials or on the direct control of territory, but subsists as a mechanism of metropolitan control of the strategic sectors of the underdeveloped countries. [\[9\]](#)



This domination is not exercised by a mysterious 'world power' but through means of the military and diplomatic actions of each power in its main areas of influence. The role of the US is more prominent in 'Plan Colombia' than in the Balkans conflict and the task of Europe is better defined in the Mediterranean crisis than in the development of the FTAA. This specificity relates to interests that each imperialist group channels in the geopolitical actions led by its states, something the theoreticians of Empire do not perceive.

## Return to industrial capitalism?

The majority of the critics of neo-liberalism in the periphery see that dependence remains the central cause of underdevelopment. But they propose to go beyond this servitude by the construction of a 'different capitalism'. Today it is no longer about a strictly national project, autonomous and centred on 'import substitution' - as imagined by their predecessors in CEPAL (The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) - but a regional model, regulated and based on internal markets. They advocate Keynesian schemas to build 'welfare states of the periphery', supported by institutional transformations (eradicate corruption, recompose legitimacy) and big changes in trade (greater protectionism), financial (limit the payment of the debt) and industrial (reorientation of production towards local activity) policies. [10]

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Not everyone gets a place on the gravy train

But how can we build an 'efficient capitalism' in countries subjected to a systematic draining of their resources? How can we realize today an objective abandoned by the dominant class in the mid 19th century? What groups will build this system of social measures and profit maximization?

The partisans of the new peripheral capitalism have no reply to these key questions. They forget that the margins to realize their project are again reduced with the growing association of peripheral dominant classes with metropolitan capital. This liaison is an obstacle to internal accumulation, encourages capital flight and makes the application of policies seeking to revive internal demand more difficult. Bourgeoisies who have not attempted in the past to found an autonomous capitalism have still less capacity to fulfil such a goal today.

Their pro-imperialist attitude limits even the viability of regional projects like Mercosur. This association is foundering after a decade of setbacks for attempts seeking to set up common economic and political institutions. All proposals for concerted action (currency, organisms, arbitration bodies) have been shelved as crisis envelops the entire zone. This failure has been deepened with the policies of 'differentiation' attempted by all the governments to show to the IMF that they 'are not irresponsible'. The regional fracture thus repeats the history of Latin American balkanisation and confirms the incapacity of the local bourgeoisies to lay down auto-centred accumulation policies.

Some authors explain this by the traditionally 'rentier' character of the bourgeoisie in the region and the consequent absence of entrepreneurs disposed to invest or take risks. But then one must conclude that this absence of impulsions for a sustained accumulation has been strengthened. Why then gamble on a project deprived of subject? What could be the meaning of building a capitalism without capitalists interested in competition and innovation?

Proposing to the workers that they substitute themselves for the dominant class in this task is equivalent to inciting them to manufacture the chains of their own exploitation. The hope that the other social sectors replace the entrepreneurs in the task of constructing a prosperous capitalism (bureaucracies, the middle class) has neither foundation nor empirical precedents.

Those who wish to build 'another capitalism' should remember that the model that prevails in each country is the



product of certain historic conditions and not of the free choice of its managers. There is an objective dynamic to this process that explains why the development of the centre accentuates the underdevelopment of the periphery. It is obvious that all the members of the peripheral nations would have liked a destiny as developed powers, but on the world market, there is not much space for the dominant groups and very much space for the dependent economies. That is why the 'successful market economies' of the periphery are exceptional or transitory. For to emerge from underdevelopment it is not enough to have anti-neo-liberal policies. Also you need to develop anti-imperialist action by building a socialist society.

## Three models under discussion

The strength of the classical theory of imperialism's ability to explain the relations of domination between centre and periphery is striking. But its ability to clarify the contemporary relations between the great powers is more subject to controversy. In this second sense, the concept of imperialism no longer seeks to explain the causes of the structural backwardness of the underdeveloped countries, but aims to clarify the type of alliances and rivalries predominant inside the imperialist camp. Diverse authors [11] have remarked on the importance of the distinction between the two senses, signalling that the modalities of domination of the periphery and those of the relations between the powers follow historically different courses.

The distinction between the imperialist phase and the free trade phase of capitalism, proposed by the Marxist theorists of the early 20th century, is the traditional point of departure to analyse this second aspect. With this distinction, they sought to characterize a new stage of the system, characterized by the reapportionment of markets between the great powers through war.

Lenin had attributed this tendency to open inter-imperialist conflict to the central place of the monopolies and finance capital, Rosa Luxemburg to the necessity of seeking external outlets to the contraction of demand, Bukharin to the clash between expansionist and protectionist interests on the part of the big companies and Trotsky to the aggravation of economic inequalities generated by accumulation itself. These interpretations claimed to explain why competition between the monopolist groups that had begun by trade confrontation and the establishment of monetary zones had ended in bloody conflict.

This characterization seemed inappropriate after the Second World War, when the perspective of armed conflicts between the powers tended to disappear. The hypothesis of such a clash was ruled out or at least rendered very improbable to the extent that economic competition between the various firms and their states was concentrated in more continental rivalries. These changes modified the terms of analysis of the second aspect of the theory of imperialism.

During the 1970s, Ernest Mandel [12] synthesized the new situation through an analysis of three possible models for the evolution of imperialism: inter-imperialist, competition, trans-nationalism (originally called 'ultra-imperialism') and super imperialism. Arguing that the dominant feature of accumulation is growing rivalry, he saw the first alternative as the most probable. He predicted also that intercontinental competition would deepen with the formation of regional alliances.

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Globalisation of the spiritual: absent friends praying by mobile at the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem

Mandel questioned the second perspective, anticipated by Kautsky and upheld by those who envisaged the constitution of trans-national associations freed from the geographical origins of their components. [13] He argued that, although the internationalisation of multinational companies weakened their national roots, a great succession of

mergers between the owners of firms of different origins was not probable. Taking account of the competitive character of capitalist reproduction, he believed it was still less feasible that such a process would be supported by the constitution of 'world states'. Moreover, he thought it highly unlikely that companies would be indifferent toward the economic conjuncture in their countries of origin and the need for national anti-cyclical policies, which an integration of this type would suppose. He thus ruled out this scenario, arguing that the unequal development of capitalism and its crises created tensions incompatible with the long-term survival of trans-national alliances.

The third alternative, super imperialism, supposed the consolidation of the domination of one power over the others and the submission of the losers to relations similar to those that existed for the peripheral countries. Mandel considered in this case that the supremacy attained by the US did not put Europe and Japan at the same level of dependence as the underdeveloped nations. He stressed that US political and military hegemony did not imply its long-term structural economic supremacy.

How can these three perspectives be analysed today? What are the dominant tendencies at the beginning of the 21st century: inter-imperialist competition, ultra-imperialism or super imperialism?

## The changes in inter-imperialist competition

The initial interpretation of the thesis of imperialism as a stage of warlike rivalry between the powers has hardly any supporters nowadays. There exists however a diluted version of this vision, now centred not on the military outcome but on the analysis of economic competition.

Some analysts stress the active intervention of the imperialist states to shore up this competition and point to the operation of neo-mercantilist policies to weaken rival companies. [\[14\]](#) Other analysts point to the homogeneity of origin of the owners of firms and the priority given to internal markets in their activity. [\[15\]](#) This subordination of companies to their national basis allows us to explain, some studies argue, why the tendency to the formation of regional blocs is more significant than trade, financial or productive globalisation. [\[16\]](#) The fact that US growth in the past decade has been realized at the expense of its rivals is also seen as the expression of a return to inter-imperialist competition. These viewpoints coincide in presenting globalisation as a cyclical process of phases of expansion and contraction at the level of internationalisation of the economy. [\[17\]](#)

This kind of argument contributes to refuting the neo-liberal mythology of 'the end of states', the 'disappearance of frontiers' and the 'unlimited mobility of labour'. The thesis of inter-imperialist competition shows how this rivalry limits industrial relocation, financial deregulation and the abolition of trading barriers, bringing out the fact that competition between blocs demands a certain geographical stability of investment, restraining capital movements and the trade policies of each state.

However, while giving the lie convincingly to the simplifications of the globalisers, these contributions do not bring out the differences that exist between the current context and that extant at the beginning of the 20th century. It is certain that inter-imperialist competition continues to determine the course of accumulation. But why does competition between the powers not currently lead to direct warlike conflagrations? The same competition happens today in the framework of a strong capitalist solidarity given that the US, Europe and Japan share the same objectives as NATO and act in a common bloc of dominant states faced with various military conflicts.

It might be argued that the mutually destructive character of nuclear weapons has changed the character of wars, neutralizing the open conflicts. But such reasoning only explains the absence of a clash between the US and the ex-USSR, without clarifying the fact that the three imperialist rivals have also avoided such a confrontation. Again, it

is certain that the 'struggle against communism' diluted the competition between capitalist powers, but this conflict has not changed in nature since the end of the 'Cold War'.

In reality, the clash between the powers has been mediated by the leap in globalisation. International capitalist activity tends to interlink with the growth of trade surpassing that of production, the formation of a planetary financial market and globalised management of affairs by the 51 companies which set the pace among the 100 biggest world enterprises.

The productive strategy of these firms is based on the combination of three options: supply of the factors of production, integral production for the local market and fragmentation of the assembly process with parts manufactured in different countries. This mixture of horizontal production (recreating in each region the model of the countries of origin) and vertical production (division of the process of production in accordance with a global plan of specialization) implies a more significant level of association between internationalised capital. [18] The companies which define their strategy on a world scale tend moreover to predominate over the less internationalised, as shown, for example, by the weight of companies of the first type in the mergers of the last decade. [19]

This advance in globalisation also explains why protectionist tendencies do not currently take on the dimension of the 1930s and do not lead to the formation of completely closed blocs. Neo-mercantilism coexists with the opposed pressure for trade liberalization, because internal exchange between the localized enterprises in different countries is growing significantly. This does not appear clearly in the current statistics, because operations between internationalised companies on a national market are generally counted as transactions internal to this country. [20]

This advance of globalisation, which weakens the traditional competition between the imperialist powers, expresses a dominant tendency and not only a cyclical feature of capitalism. The periods of national or regional retreat are movements contrary to this central impulsion of amplification of the geographical field of action of capital. The brake to this tendency comes from disequilibria generated by world expansion and not from the structural pendularity of this process.

In the final instance, the globalising pressure is the dominant force for it reflects the growing action of the law of value on the international scale. The more the trans-national enterprises take on importance, the greater the field of valorisation of capital on a global scale to the detriment of exclusively national areas. This is expressed in the tendency to the formation of world prices that represent new yardsticks of the labour time socially necessary for the production of commodities. [21]

The internationalised management of business erodes the vigour of the classical model of inter-imperialist competition. But this transformation is not perceptible if one observes the globalisation underway as a 'process as old as capitalism itself'. This attitude tends to ignore the qualitative differences which separate each stage of this process; and this distinction is vital if we wish to understand why the internationalisation of, for example, the East India Company in the 16th century, has little in common with the globally segmented production of General Motors.

The contemporary rivalry between companies unfolds in a more concerted framework of activity. It is inside global bodies of political (UN, G8), economic (IMF, WB, WTO) or military (NATO) significance that this common activity is negotiated. Unlike in the past, the traditional activity of competitive blocs coexists with the growing influence of these institutions, which act in the interests of the internationalised companies.

This is why the contemporary remoulding of territories, legislations and markets takes place through high authorities and not through means of wars between powers. If it is obvious that the new imperialist configuration is nourished by systematic warlike massacres, the scene of these massacres is peripheral. The multiplication of these conflicts does

not lead to inter-imperialist wars and this change is due to the qualitative leap of globalisation; something the old model of inter-imperialist competition does not allow us to see or explain.

# The trans-nationalist exaggeration

Some defenders of the trans-nationalist hypothesis argue that contemporary firms already operate in a manner disconnected from their country of origin. [22] Others [23] attribute the appearance of 'global capital' to the informatisation of the economy, the substitution of industrial activity through the action of networks and to the expansion of 'immaterial' labour. They conclude that this conjuncture eliminates the centrality of the process of production, favours the birth of a planetary market and strengthens the 'extra-territoriality of the empire'.

This vision tends to interpret embryonic tendencies as established facts and to deduce from the growing association between international capitals a level of integration that in no way exists yet. The trans-nationalisation of capital constitutes currently only the beginning of a process of structural transformation, which in the past has necessitated some centuries. No evidence of the last decade suggests that such a radical foreshortening of the historic rhythms of capitalism is likely. [24]

Trans-nationalism exaggerates the rise of world capital, reflecting a certain media pressure to construct theoretical novelties to match the rhythm of journalistic consumption. It is enough to observe the parameter indicated by Mandel - the sensitivity of the globalised firms to each national economic conjuncture - to invalidate the ultra-imperialist thesis. The four main economic features of the 1990s - US growth, European stagnation, Japanese depression and crisis at the periphery - illustrate the non-existence of a common evolution of 'globalised capital'. The profits and losses of each group of firms have depended on their situation in each region. The fact that US growth has been supported by the decline of their rivals confirms the existence of a winning bloc differentiated from the European and Japanese companies.

Certain forms of world association are beginning to emerge and for the first time trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific structural alliances have emerged between European, US and Japanese companies. Connections of this type weaken the cohesion of the EU, oblige the US to fix their economic policy according to external financing and push Japan to grudgingly pursue the opening up of its markets. But these links do not eliminate the existence of structured competitive blocs around the old state bonds.

In its more moderate variants trans-nationalism ignores the fact that the FTAA, EU or ASEAN express these rival poles. But in the extreme variant of Negri this conception also propagates all kinds of fantasies on the subject of geographical 'decentring', ignoring the fact that the strategic activity of firms continues to be based in the US, Europe or Japan. Global liaison has created a new common framework for competition, without however eliminating the territorial cement of this competition.

It is on the other hand certain that the information technology transformations favour the global interlinking of capital, for they tend to amalgamate financial activity, accelerate commercial transactions and accentuate the reorganization of the labour process. But the technological revolution also reinforces competition and the necessity of regional alliances between firms who compete for markets. 'The economy of networks' not only unifies but also accentuates the national domain. The application of new information technologies is guided by capitalist parameters of profitability, competition and exploitation that prevent indiscriminate flows of investment on the world scale or unrestricted movement of labour. Their localization depends on the conditions of accumulation and valorisation of capital, which oblige the 200 globalised firms to concentrate their operational centres in a small handful of central countries.

## Classes and states - II

Some argue that the trans-nationalisation of capital has led to a similar process at the level of the dominant classes and the states; as evidence of this change, they point to the increase in foreign investments, the internationalisation of labour and the weight of the global bodies. [25] Negri [26] considers as established the formation of a new legal order - inspired by the US Constitution - emerging from the transfers of sovereignty to the imperial centre represented by the UN.

Such a schema is completely forced for there is no indication of a complete globalisation of the ruling class. Whatever its internal divisions, the US bourgeoisie constitutes a grouping that is clearly differentiated from its Japanese or European homologues. These classes act through distinct governments, institutions and states, defending their own customs, tax, financial and monetary policies as a function of their specific interests. Even the integration of some bourgeoisies around a supranational state - as in the case of Europe - does not convert them into 'world capitalists' because they are not linked in the same way with their non-European competitors in the same state.

The eventual trans-nationalisation of the management layers of some companies and the leading layers of the international bodies does not witness either to the emergence of a world ruling class. This staff of cosmopolitan bureaucrats forms a bureaucracy with high responsibilities, but it does not amount to a class. [27] The main parameter to evaluate the existence of such a social formation - ownership of the means of production - indicates clearly a geographical fragmentation of the bourgeoisie following the old structure of nations. The owners of each trans-national company are American, European or Japanese and not 'citizens of the world'. The deeds of ownership of the 500 most important companies confirm this national connection: 48% of them belong to US capitalists, 30% to Europeans and 10% to Japanese. [28]

Moreover, the IMF, WTO or World Economic Forum (WEF) are not homogeneous state structures, but centres of negotiation of the various firms who defend through their various state representatives various conceptions of trade agreements and treaties of investment. The firms rest on these structures to struggle against their rivals. When, for example, Boeing and Airbus dispute the world aeronautic market, they have more recourse to lobbyists in the US and Europe than to WTO bureaucrats. In inter-imperialist competition, it is states or regional blocs that count and not inter-company link ups of the Toyota-General Motors against Chrysler-Daimler Benz type.

The privileged role that the states retain shows that the main capitalist functions of this institution (guaranteeing the right of property, preparing the conditions of extraction and realization of surplus-value, assuring coercion and consensus) cannot be globalised as rapidly as business. [29] Even if a trans-national state could find the resources, experience and personnel needed to fulfil totally, for example, the repressive functions, it would lack the authority that each bourgeoisie has conquered in its nation over centuries to exercise this task.

Negri ignores these contradictions when he postulates the existence of a new UN imperial sovereignty. He deduces this capacity from a restrictive legalistic analysis that is totally disconnected from capital's logic of functioning. What is most surprising is his candid presentation of the UN as a system which is oppressive at the summit (Security Council) and democratic at the base (General Assembly), forgetting that this institution - at all its levels - acts as a pillar of the current imperialist order. This rosy view rests on an apologetic attitude towards the US Constitution, misunderstanding how the elite of this country has built a political system of oppression, mediated by a mechanism of separation of powers intended to thwart the popular mandate. [30] This vision of imperial sovereignty pushes to the extreme the errors of the trans-nationalist viewpoint, for it exaggerates its main weakness: the failure to grasp the fact that the greater world integration of capital is implemented in the framework of states and existing or regionalized dominant classes.

# The errors of 'super imperialism'

The characterization of the absolute domination of the US is partially implicit in the thesis of Empire. Although Negri [31] stresses that the Empire 'lacks a territorial centre' he also says that all the institutions of the new stage derive from US predecessors and are built in opposition to European decadence.

This interpretation converges with all the characterizations that identify the current US leadership with the 'predominance of a single power', a 'unipolar world' or the consolidation of the 'US era'. These visions actualise the theory of super imperialism that supposes the complete hegemony of one rival over its competitors.

The empirical support for this thesis stems from the US advance in the course of the last decade, in particular on the political and military level. While the action of the UN is aligned on the priorities of the US, the presence of the latter extends across every corner of the planet, through agreements with Russia and intervention in the regions - like central Asia or Eastern Europe - which were until now outside its control.

The US enjoys a clear technological and productive superiority over its rivals. This supremacy is shown by the current world recession because the level of world economic activity displays an extraordinary degree of dependence on the US cycle.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/25\\_Imperialism-Philippines.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/25_Imperialism-Philippines.jpg)]

The US has resumed in the 1990s the leadership role held by Europe in the 1970s and Japan in the 1980s. Since the Reagan government the US has exploited the advantages that gave it its military supremacy to finance its economic reconversion with the rest of the world's resources. In certain periods it lets the dollar fall (to boost exports) while in others it allows it to rise (to absorb foreign capital). In the same way, it combines trade liberalization and protectionism in the sectors where it holds, respectively, a competitive advantage or disadvantage. This regained hegemony is explained both by the international implantation of US companies and because US capitalism has been oriented for the past centuries towards the penetration of the internal markets of its competitors.

Nonetheless, none of these facts proves the existence of super imperialism, as US supremacy has not led to the submission of Europe and Japan. The conflicts that oppose the great powers have the character of inter-imperialist conflicts and are not comparable to the clashes between central and peripheral countries. In its trade disputes with the US France does not behave like Argentina, inside the IMF Japan does not beg for credits but behaves as a creditor and Germany is the co-author and not the victim of the G8 resolutions.

The relationship between the US and its competitors does not have the features of an imperial domination. US primacy in geopolitical relations is indubitable, but the 'the trans-Atlantic link' does not imply the subordination of Europe and the 'Pacific axis' is not characterized by Japanese subordination to every US demand. [32]

The super imperialist thesis exaggerates US leadership and underestimates its contradictions. Gowan [33] judges correctly that the US preference for a 'supremacist' form of domination (that is, to the detriment of its rivals) rather than a 'hegemonic' form (sharing the fruits of power) undermines its leadership. The strength of the US is moreover built on interlinking and not - as in the past - through the military crushing of its competitors. And this modality obliges the forging of alliances that are more fragile, since they do not originate in a military solution. The elitist character of current imperialism - in the sense that is deprived of the massive chauvinist and patriotic support of the early 20th century - also serves to erode US superiority.

US supremacy is exercised practically through wars in the most unstable peripheral zones of the planet. Yet this very bellicosity weakens the super imperialist course because these systematic aggressions reinforce instability. The new



doctrine of 'war without end' applied by the Bush administration deepens this loss of control, for it breaks with the tradition of limited confrontation involving a certain proportionality between the means employed and the ends pursued. In the campaigns against Iraq, the 'drugs trade' or 'terrorism' the US seeks to create a climate of permanent fear, of aggression without any time limits or precise objectives. [34]

This type of imperialist action not only dislocates nations, disintegrates states and destroys societies but also generates 'boomerang effects', such as the US has experienced with the Taliban. 'Total war' without legal scruples destabilizes the 'world order' and deteriorates the authority of its authors. It is for this reason that the perspective of super imperialism has not been realized and is threatened by the action of domination of the US itself.

## A combination of three models

None of the three alternative models to that of classic imperialism allows us to clarify the currently predominant relations between the great powers. The thesis of inter-imperialist competition does not explain the reasons which inhibit military confrontation and ignores the advances that have taken place in the integration of capital. The trans-nationalist orientation does not recognize that rivalries between firms continue to be mediated by the action of classes and national or regional states. The super imperialist vision does not take account of the absence of relations of subordination between the developed economies comparable to those that prevail with the periphery.

These insufficiencies lead us to think that contemporary rivalry, integration and hegemony tend to combine in a new manner which is more complex than had been imagined in the 1970s. Studying this tangled web is more useful than asking which of the three models conceived is prevalent at this moment. In the course of recent decades, the advance of globalisation has stimulated the trans-national association of capital and has also led one power to assume leadership in order to maintain the cohesion of the system. [35]

Recognizing this combination allows us to understand the intermediary character of the current situation. For the moment neither rivalry, nor integration nor hegemony predominate fully, but we can observe a change in the relationship of forces inside each power, which favours the trans-nationalised sectors to the detriment of the national sectors inside existing states and classes. [36] This differs from one country to another (in Canada or Holland the globalised fraction is undoubtedly stronger than in the US or Germany) and from one sector to another (in the car industry trans-nationalisation is greater than in steel). Capital internationalises while the old national states continue to guarantee the general reproduction of the system.

The new combination of rivalry, integration and imperialist supremacy forms part of the great recent transformations of capitalism. It is part of the framework of a stage characterized by the offensive of capital against labour (higher unemployment, poverty and deregulation of labour), its sectoral (privatisation) and geographic (towards the ex-'socialist countries') expansion, the information technology revolution and financial deregulation.

These processes have altered the functioning of capitalism and multiplied the disequilibria of the system by weakening the state regulation of economic cycles and stimulating rivalry between firms. The old political institutions are losing authority to the extent that a part of real power is displaced towards the new globalised organisms, which lack both legitimacy and popular support. Moreover, imperialist military escalation leads to collapses in the peripheral regions, deepening world instability. [37]

These contradictions are characteristic of capitalism and do not present in any way the similarities with the Roman Empire postulated by numerous authors. Such analogies point to the similarity of the mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion of the dominant groups in the imperial centre, [38] the institutional similarities (Monarchy - Pentagon,



Aristocracy - Firms, Democracy - UN Assembly) [39] or the decadence common to the two systems (the fall of Rome - the 'rotteness' of the current régime). [40]

However, contemporary capitalism is not being eroded by an over ambitious territorial expansion, or corroded by a failing agriculture, unproductive labour or the wastefulness of the dominant caste. Unlike the slave mode of production, capitalism does not generate the paralysis of the productive forces but their uncontrolled development (subject to cyclical crises).

The contradictions derived from the accumulation and extraction of surplus value, the valorisation of capital or the realization of value lead to crises but not to the agony of Antiquity. However, the crucial difference resides in the role played by social subjects with capacities of historic transformation that did not exist in the era of Roman decadence.

## The domains of popular resistance

The workers, exploited and oppressed of the entire planet are the adversaries of imperialism in the 21st century. Their action has in recent years modified the climate of neo-liberal triumphalism that prevailed among the elite of the dominant class from the beginning of the 1990s. A sentiment of disorientation has begun to set in among the globalising 'establishment', as shown by the critiques of current economic policy formulated by the popes of neo-liberalism.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/27\\_Palestinian\\_workers.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/27_Palestinian_workers.jpg)]

Imperialism's border guard: Palestinian workers queue through the night in hope of getting Israeli work permits

Soros, Stiglitz and Sachs are now writing books that denounce the absence of control of the markets, the excess of austerity or the inconvenience of extreme structural adjustments. Their characterizations are as superficial as the overflowing eulogies they previously addressed to capitalism. They contribute no valuable reflection but witness to the malaise that has appeared at the summit of imperialism in the face of the social disaster created during the years of privatising euphoria.

These challenges to 'wildcat capitalism' reflect the advances of the popular resistance, because the masters of the world can no longer confer in peace. They meet in distant corners, their meetings are cut short, and they must always face the demonstrations of the movement for another globalisation. They cannot isolate themselves in Davos, flee the scandalous repression of Genoa, or ignore the challenge of Porto Alegre. There is longer a 'single system of thought' or 'sole alternative' and with the development of popular scepticism, the image of the all-powerful imperialist recedes.

The participants in the movement for another globalisation are the main protagonists of this change. This resistance has already gone beyond the media impact provoked by the boycott of the summits of presidents, company bosses and bankers. Seattle marked a big step forwards for the development of this struggle that has not been beaten back since September 11, 2001. The predictions of a great reflux have been rapidly disproved and 'anti-terrorist' intimidation has not infected the ranks of the demonstrators. Between October and December of 2001, 250,000 youth mobilized in Perugia, 100,000 in Rome, 75,000 in London and 350,000 in Madrid. In February the second meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre surpassed the attendance at previous meetings and a little after a march in Barcelona attracted 300,000 demonstrators. The mobilization in Seville against the 'Europe of capital' was attended by 100,000 people. These events confirm the vitality of a movement that tends to incorporate in its action the struggle against militarism. An anti-war movement begins to emerge, in the image of the struggles against the war crimes in Algeria in the 1960s and in Vietnam in the 1970s. [41]

The working class stands out as the other adversary of imperialism, both through its convergence with the movement against capitalist globalisation (very significant in Seattle) and the renewal of its own struggles. The stage of severe downturn in struggle inaugurated by the defeats of the 1980s (FIAT-Italy in 1980, the British miners in 1984-85) has tended to reverse since the mid-1990s, driven by important mobilizations in Europe (strikes in France and Germany) and in the most industrialized areas of the periphery (Korea, South Africa, Brazil). The extraordinary mobilization of millions of Italian workers last May and the powerful general strike in Spain confirm this resurgence of the working class.

The popular uprisings in the periphery represent the third challenge for imperialism. The examples of this resistance in South America are incontestable, beginning with the significant extension of the Argentine rebellion. While the 'economic contagion' has spread to the neighbouring nations (capital flight, bank failures and a fall in investment), there is also the 'political contagion' with demonstrations and 'caceroleos' in Uruguay, the big peasant mobilizations in Paraguay and the massive uprisings against privatisation in Peru.

On the other hand, the popular intervention against the coup in Venezuela marks the beginning of a massive reaction against the pro-dictatorial policy promoted by US imperialism. This success for the oppressed constitutes only the first round of a confrontation which will see many episodes, since the State Department has embarked on an escalation of provocations against any government, people or policy that does not meekly comply with its demands.

On the world scale the most dramatic case of such aggression is the massacre of the Palestinians. The level of imperialist savagery in the Middle East recalls the great barbarisms of colonial history and that is why the popular resistance in this region is symbolic and awakens the solidarity of all the peoples of the planet.

The movement against capitalist globalisation, the resurgence of the working class and the rebellions at the periphery show the limits of capital's offensive. At the end of a decade of social savagery, the relationship of forces is beginning to change and this opens a new ideological space for critical thought that would render the ideas of socialism attractive. To the extent that neo-liberalism loses its prestige, socialism ceases to be a forbidden word and Marxism is no longer regarded as an archaic system of thought. This renaissance poses anew various questions of socialist strategy.

## Four political challenges

A new internationalism has erupted with the movement for 'another globalisation'. These mobilizations are marked by a challenging of the principles of competition, individualism and profit and have already generated an advance in anti-capitalist consciousness, reflected in some of the slogans of the movement ('the world is not for sale'). Helping to transform this embryonic critique of capital into an emancipatory proposal is the first task that falls to socialists.

This alternative is already being debated in the world forums, when one analyses the social perspectives of the spontaneous internationalism of the movement. In this movement, there is a consistent opposition to the fundamentalist reactions against imperialist atrocities and a similar rejection of ethnic or religious confrontations between the exploited peoples, provoked by the right. This internationalist solidarity is incompatible with any kind of capitalist project, for such a project can only promote exploitation and thus stimulate national confrontations. Only socialism offers a perspective of real community between the workers of the world.

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/28\\_Richard\\_Helms.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/28_Richard_Helms.jpg)]

Dead but not forgotten: Richard Helms, the CIA's weapon of mass destruction against Allende's Chile

The generalized revival of the anti-imperialist struggle at the periphery represents the second challenge for socialists.

Some theorists ignore this eruption, because they have decreed the end of nationalism and celebrated this disappearance without being able to distinguish between the reactionary and progressive currents of this movement. These authors declare, moreover, the uselessness of any tactic, strategy or political priority towards the new 'horizontal struggles' for according to them these are combats between capital and labour without any form of mediation. [\[42\]](#)

This vision constitutes a crude simplification of the national struggle, for it puts in the same bag the Taliban and the Palestinians, the executors of the ethnic massacres in Africa or the Balkans and the artisans of the wars of liberation of recent decades (Cuba, Vietnam, Algeria). It does not distinguish or situate progress and reaction. For this reason it does not understand why the peoples of the Third World fight for the abolition of the foreign debt, the nationalization of energy resources or the protection of local production.

Defining tactics and conceiving specific strategies is all the more important in that the national demands of the exploited of the periphery have no meaning for the workers of the central nations. The trans-nationalist viewpoint repeats the old neo-liberal hostility towards the concrete forms of popular resistance in the underdeveloped countries, employing a more radical language. Its imprecision diffuses a sentiment of powerlessness in the face of imperialist domination, for in the world they describe - without frontiers, centres and territories - it is impossible to localize the oppressor or choose the method of confronting them.

The third challenge for socialists is conceiving the strategies of seizure and radical transformation of the state to open the road to emancipation. This objective demands the demystification of the neo-liberal questioning of the utility of state intervention and neutralist faith of constitutionalism which masks the control by the dominant class over this institution. In particular, the opposition between neo-liberal deregulators and the advocates of regulation only hides a common capitalist management of the state. This manoeuvre is the cause of the growing divorce between society and state. The more public affairs depend on entrepreneurial profits the greater the weight acquired by the apparatuses and bureaucracies distant from the needs of the majority of the population.

But the transcendence of this fracture demands the inauguration of a new collective management allowing an advance to the progressive extinction of the elitist and oppressive character of the state. This objective cannot be attained through a magic act of dissolution of institutions that have age-old roots, nor by engaging on the enigmatic emancipatory road proposed by those who postulate a change of society that renounces the seizure of the state and the exercise of power. [\[43\]](#)

Some theorists argue that in the current 'society of control' the forms of domination are so pervasive that they block any social transformation founded on the popular management of the state. [\[44\]](#) But this suggestion of an omnipresent power ('which is everywhere and nowhere') transforms every concrete debate on the struggle against exploitation into a metaphysical reflection on the impotence of the individual faced with his oppressive environment. By avoiding the analysis of the objective roots and social foundations of this subjection, it becomes impossible to conceive the concrete routes to the transcendence of capitalist domination. [\[45\]](#)

Identifying the agents of this project of anti-capitalist transformation is the fourth challenge which socialists face. If one observes workers on strike, youth in the movement against capitalist globalisation and the masses mobilized at the periphery, it is not hard to define the authors of an emancipatory change. This new popular protagonism undermines the individualist neo-liberal discourse concerning the end of collective action but it does not yet generate recognition of the central role of the oppressed classes (in particular that of wage earners) in social transformation.

This omission is due, for one thing, to the weight accorded to 'citizenship' in political change, forgetting that this category lumps together the oppressors and the oppressed in granting them the same status and ignores the fact that the 'citizen-worker' has no access to the functions exercised every day by the 'citizen-capitalist' (to hire and fire,

accumulate, waste, dominate). Even in the most radical characterizations which speak of the 'insurgent citizenry' 'world citizenry', the frontier of class is dissolved and social antagonism is relegated to the second level.

Another way of diluting class analysis is to replace the notion of worker or wage earner with the concept of 'multitude'. This category is presented as the embryo of a 'counter-empire' because of its capacity to agglutinate the 'aspirations for liberation' of 'cosmopolitans, nomads and emigrants'. [46]

Although the promoters of this category recognize its essentially poetic sense, they nonetheless claim to apply it to political action. [47] This transfer generates innumerable confusions, for the same multitude can mean an amorphous grouping of individuals (nomads) and at other times refer to the action of particular forces (immigrants). In neither of these two cases it is explained why this category occupies such a significant place in the social struggle of an empire, which is not localizable and which does not confront well defined competitors. But the most difficult thing is to elucidate what use this category is.

It is possible to arrive at more useful conclusions by abandoning verbal confusions and analysing instead the emancipatory potential of the working class to steer a socialist project. This analysis can start from the growing 'proletarianisation of the world', that is from the strategic social weight attained by workers, defined in the broad sense as the total mass of wage earners. [48] This impressive force can transform itself into an effective anti-capitalist power on condition there is a significant leap in the socialist consciousness of the exploited.

The conditions for such a political advance are already met, as shown by the debates on internationalism, the state and the subject of social transformation. As in 1890-1920, the debate on imperialism is again at the centre of this political maturation. Will these similarities extend to the growth of the socialist movement? Perhaps the emergence of parties, leaders and thinkers comparable to the classical Marxists of the past century will be the surprise of the new decade.

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[1] I have analysed this process in: Claudio Katz, '[New economic turbulences](#)', IV 330, May 2001; 'Las crisis recientes en la periferia', Realidad Económica number 183, October-November 2001, Buenos Aires. The polarization between the centre and the periphery is also recognized by those authors who classify nations into four hierarchical circles (central powers, countries which receive foreign investment, potential receptors of these flows and peripheral economies) and who contend that the sole change possible in this hierarchy would be the ascension of countries from the third rank to the second (or vice versa). Other changes are considered as very unlikely (from the second to the first or from the fourth to the second). See Charles Albert Michalet, 'La séduction des nations', Économica, Paris 1999 (chapter 2)

[2] Carlos Montero, 'Efecto en América Latina de nuevos subsidios al agro en EEUU', (ATTAC, May 29, 2002).

[3] Samir Amin, 'Africa: living on the fringe', Monthly Review, vol. 53, number 10, March 2002.

[4] 'El fantasma del protegido', ClarÃ-n, June 9, 2002.

[5] 'US military bases and empire' (editorial), Monthly Review, vol. 53, number 10, March 2002.

[6] Phil Hearse, "[Behind the War on Terrorism](#)", IV 335; Yvan Lemaitre, 'La paix et la justice impossibles' and Christian Piquet, 'Nouvelle donne, nouveaux défis', Critique Communiste, number 165, Winter 2002; Janette Habel, 'États Unis-Amérique Latine', Contretemps number 3, February 2002.

[7] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire, (Cambridge, MA, 2000); Tony Negri 'El imperio, supremo estadio del imperialismo', Desde los cuatro puntos, number 31, May 2001; Toni Negri, 'Imperio: el nuevo lugar de nuestras conquistas', Cuadernos del sur, number 32, November 2001.

- [8] William Robinson, 'Global capitalism and nation-state-centric', *Science and Society*, volume 65, number 4, Winter, 2001-2002.
- [9] John Bellamy Foster, 'Imperialism and empire', *Monthly Review*, volume 53, number 7, December 2001; Daniel Bensaïd, 'El imperio estado terminal?', *Desde los cuatro puntos* number 31, May 2001; Daniel Bensaïd, 'Le nouveau désordre mondial', *Contretemps*, number 2, September 2001.
- [10] These positions are habitually put forward by the anti-neo-liberal current in the forums of the 'anti-globalisation' movement.
- [11] Bob Sutcliffe, 'Conclusion', Robert Owen, 'Introduction', Tom Kemp 'The Marxist theory of imperialism', in Robert Owen & Bob Sutcliffe, *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, London, 1972.
- [12] Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, chapter 10 (Verso, London, 1972); Ernest Mandel, 'Las leyes del desarrollo desigual', 'Ensayos sobre el neocapitalismo', *Era*, México 1969. A similar analysis has been also formulated by Bob Rowthorn, 'El imperialismo en la década de 1970', 'Capital monopolista y capital monopolista europeo', *Granica*, Buenos Aires 1971.
- [13] Stephen Hymer, 'Empresas multinacionales e internacionalización del capital'. Ediciones Periferia, Buenos Aires, 1972; Martin Nicolaus, 'La contradicción universal', 'El imperialismo hoy', Ediciones Periferia, Buenos Aires 1971.
- [14] James Petras, 'Imperialismo versus imperio', *Laberinto* number 8, February 2002.
- [15] Paolo Giussani, '¿Hay evidencia empírica de una tendencia hacia la globalización?' in J. Arriola & D. Guerrero, *La nueva economía política de la globalización*, Universidad de País Vasco, Bilbao 2000.
- [16] Stavros Tombazos, 'La mondialisation liberale et l'impérialisme tardif', *Contretemps*, number 2, September 2001.
- [17] Tony Smith, 'Pour une théorie marxiste de la globalisation', *Contretemps*, number 2, September 2001.
- [18] Wladimir Andreff, 'Interventions et débats', 'Mondialisation', *Espaces Marx*, Paris 1999; Philippe Zarifian, 'Interventions et débats', 'Mondialisation', *Espaces Marx*, Paris 1999.
- [19] Richard D Boff & Edward Herman, 'Merger, concentration and the erosion of democracy', *Monthly Review*, volume 53, number 1, May 2001.
- [20] Some studies which have begun to take account of this problematic show, for example, that the US trade deficit calculated taking into account the location of firms constitutes in reality a surplus from the point of view of the ownership of firms. Cf. D Bryan, 'Global accumulation and accounting for national economic identity', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, volume 33, 1999.
- [21] Michel Husson, 'Interventions et débats', 'Mondialisation', *Espaces Marx*, Paris 1999.
- [22] Odile Castel, 'La naissance de l'Ultra-imperialisme', in Gérard Dumenil & Dominique Levy, *Le triangle infernal*, PUF, Paris 1999.
- [23] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, 'Empire', preface; Toni Negri, 'Entrevista', *Pagina 12*, March 31, 2002; Tony Negri 'El imperio, supremo estadio del imperialismo', *Desde los cuatro puntos*, number 31, May 2001.
- [24] This is the justified objection of Giovanni Arrighi: 'Global capitalism and the persistence of north-south divide', *Science and Society*, volume 65, number 4, Winter 2001-2002.
- [25] William Robinson, 'Global capitalism and nation-state-centric', *Science and Society*, volume 65, number 4, Winter 2001-2002.
- [26] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, *Empire*, (chap. I-1, II-5, III-5, III-6).

[27] Michael Mann; 'Globalisation is among other things, transnational, international and american' and Kees van der Pijl, 'Globalisation or class society in transition?', Science and Society, volume 65, number 4, Winter 2001-2002.

[28] Financial Times, May 10, 2002.

[29] Robert Went, 'Globalisation: towards a transnational state?', Science and Society, volume 65, number 4, Winter 2001-2002.

[30] Atilio Boron, 'Imperio e imperialismo', Buenos Aires 2002 (chapters 4 and 6).

[31] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire (chapter IV-1)

[32] Claude Serfati, 'Une bourgeoisie mondiale pour un capitalisme mondialisé?'. 'Bourgeoisie: états d'une classe dominante', Syllepse, Paris 2001; Claude Serfati, 'Violences de la mondialisation capitaliste', Contretemps, number 2, September 2001.

[33] Peter Gowan, 'Cosmopolitisme libéral et gouvernance globale', Contretemps, number 2, September 2001.

[34] See Contretemps, number 3, February 2002: Gilbert Achcar, 'Le choc des barbaries'; Daniel Bensaïd, 'Dieu, que ces guerres sont saintes'; Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Guerre infinie'.

[35] Michel Husson, 'Le fantasme du marché mondial', Contretemps, number 2, September 2001.

[36] Leo Panitch, 'The state, globalisation and the new imperialism', Historical Materialism, volume 9, Winter 2001.

[37] Alejandro Dabat, La globalización en perspectiva histórica (Mimeo), México 1999; Christian Barrere, 'Interventions et débats', 'Mondialisation', Espaces Marx, Paris 1999.

[38] Toni Negri, 'Imperio: el nuevo lugar de nuestras conquistas', Cuadernos del sur, number 32, November 2001.

[39] Toni Negri & Michael Hardt, 'La multitude contre l'empire', Contretemps, number 2, September 2001.

[40] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire, chapter IV-1); Gérard De Bernis, 'Interventions et débats', 'Mondialisation', Espaces Marx, Paris 1999; Marcos Del Roio, 'Las contradicciones del imperio' and Carlos Martins, 'La nueva encrucijada', Herramienta, number 18, summer 2001-2002.

[41] Tariq Ali, interview, Inprecor 466/467, January-February, 2002.

[42] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire (preface, chapters I-3, II-2, II-3).

[43] This is the thesis of John Holloway: 'Entrevista', Página 12, December 3, 2001.

[44] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire (chapter I-2).

[45] See the excellent critique by Alex Callinicos, 'Toni Negri in perspective', International Socialism no. 92, Autumn 2001.

[46] Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, Empire (chapter III-6)

[47] Toni Negri, 'Entrevista', Pagina 12, March 31, 2002.

[48] This weight grew massively in the course of the 20th century, going from 50 million in 1900 to 2 billion in 2000 (while over the same time period the world population went from 1 to 6 billion). See Daniel Bensaïd, 'Les irréductibles: théorèmes de la résistance à l'air du temps', Textuel, Paris 2001.