

Origins and Developments of Imperialism

Imperialism

- Imperialism is first and foremost part of a long transhistorical phase dating back to the period of empires (Rome, Persia, Ottoman, etc.).
- This imperialism was characterized by the domination of strong states over weaker ones, with a predominantly military logic.

Primitive Accumulation, Capitalism and Imperialism

Imperialism

- The term imperialism does not appear in Marx's work, but first in liberal economist John Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study*, 1902.
- Geopolitical competition between the great powers was the primary characteristic of imperialism at that time.

Imperialism

- The second, much more specific, meaning of imperialism, which is part of a Marxist definition, characterizes imperialism as the last stage of capitalism (from Russian of Lenin's pamphlet written after the Russian Revolution).
- Lenin's book did not attempt to give a definitive definition of imperialism, but to understand the dominant characteristics of imperialism at the time.

Imperialism

- It was later taken up by Marxists in the early 20th century.
- It is important to understand that this concept does not directly refer to a theory of exploitation of Third World countries: rather, it refers to an analysis of the contradictions between capitalist countries and to a theory of the world economy, which can already be found in Karl Marx.
- Karl Marx emphasized the tendency of capital to create a globalized system, integrating the whole world into a single economic entity.

Imperialism

- As Karl Marx pointed out in The Manifesto, "driven by the need for ever wider outlets for its products, the bourgeoisie is invading the entire surface of the globe".
- This concept, which implies that the realization of surplus value constantly requires the opening up of external markets, is well suited to the period of imperialist expansion, in which dependent countries play an increasingly important role as outlets.

Capitalism

- Karl Marx argued that capitalism was rooted in two fundamental characteristics:
 - 1) The exploitation of wage labor by capital, class fundamental antagonism
 - 2) that the capitalist class is not a unified block, there are rivalries between capitalists fighting on leftovers and profits of exploitation.

In other words, imperialism is a process of conflict between powerful capitalist states on the control of the spoils of the planet.

- The forms this economic competition takes are market share, raw materials, transport access, etc...

Capitalism

- Liberal economist Adam Smith (1723-1790) postulated that the division of labor was indispensable for the enrichment of nations, but that this was inconceivable without "previous accumulation of stock or reserve", based on accumulated savings.
- Nearly a century later, Marx transformed this concept in *Das Kapital*, calling it "primitive accumulation".
- At the same time, Marx subjected it to a profound semantic transformation: it became the combination of two historical processes marked by violence: 1) the "flight" and accelerated concentration of capital through trade, interest loans and plunder; 2) the brutal separation of producers and their means of production.
- For the founder of scientific socialism, primitive accumulation had thus played "the same role in political economy as original sin had in theology ».

Primitive accumulation

- Primitive accumulation, as developed by Marx, describes the historical moment and process by which an exploiting class appropriates and accumulates initial resources (land, raw materials, workers, etc.).
- This is a prerequisite for the development of the capitalist mode of production. It enables the bourgeoisie to accumulate the resources needed to create large-scale enterprises, while at the same time creating a dispossessed class of future workers.
- Neoliberalism perpetuates this primitive accumulation with ever-renewed violence, in the form of accumulation by dispossession.

Primitive accumulation

- Since 1980-1990, the relative devaluation of raw materials, the privatization of common goods (land, forests, water, traditional knowledge, etc.) and public services (energy, social housing, transport, telecoms, health, education, etc.), as well as the expropriation of the homes and pension funds of millions of Western workers for the benefit of finance capital, have been denounced by some authors as new enclosures (privatization of British communal lands, from the 15th to the 18th centuries).
- The principal agent is finance capital, whose action is developing on a global scale, at the expense of societies in the South of course, but also in the North. The same is true of the privatization and liberalization policies pursued in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and in China, which have deprived workers and peasants of important acquired rights, thus triggering an unprecedented polarization of wealth.

Primitive accumulation

- Political power is increasingly mobilized to facilitate the concentration, in the hands of capital, of the wealth available in a given territory. The aim is no longer simply to accumulate the surplus value produced by the exploitation of wage labor, but to expropriate the holders of existing resources, whether natural or produced, real or personal, collective or individual, for the benefit of imperialist capital.
- Thus, in parallel with, and closely linked to, expanded accumulation, contemporary forms of primitive accumulation are developing

Imperialism and colonialism

Imperialism and colonialism

- Throughout the history of capitalism, the ruling class has always sought an additional source of wealth - the taking of wealth produced by other countries.
- The growth of the first forms of capitalism, at the end of the Middle Ages, was accompanied by the creation by the Western states of a vast colonial empire - the empires of Spain and Portugal, Holland and France, and, of course, England.
- Wealth found its way into the hands of the ruling classes of Western Europe, while whole societies in what became known as the Third World (Africa, Asia and South America) were destroyed.

Imperialism and colonialism

- Slavery was a key element in the capitalists' drive to develop funds for investment in emerging industries, a process Karl Marx called "the primitive accumulation of capital".
- England's industrialization was decisively advanced by the successful creation of an extensive regime of primitive accumulation based on the super-exploitation of slaves in America.

Imperialism and colonialism

- Marx described this situation as follows:

"Slavery is as much a key element of bourgeois industry as are machines, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, and without cotton there would be no modern industry. It was slavery that gave the colonies their value, it was the colonies that created the world market, and it is the world market that is the precondition for large-scale, mass-production industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of definite importance. »

The wealth of the slave trade financed the industry.

Imperialism and colonialism

- Possession of an empire enabled England to develop as the world's leading industrial power.
- It was in a position to prevent other capitalist states from obtaining raw materials, markets and lucrative investment zones in its Third World.

Imperialism and colonialism

- As new industrial powers such as Germany, Japan and the USA developed, they also sought these advantages.
- They built rival empires or "spheres of influence".
- Faced with economic crises, each major capitalist power tried to solve its problems by clinging to the spheres of influence of its rivals. Imperialism led to world war I and II.

Imperialism and colonialism

- The development of imperialism meant that capitalists didn't just exploit the working class in their own countries; they physically took control of other countries and exploited their populations.
- For the most exploited classes, this meant they were exploited by foreign capitalists as well as by their own ruling class. They were doubly exploited.
- The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were characterized by a significant development of modern imperialism, which was the consequence of the development of the concentration and centralization of capitalism with the development of the capitalist system on a global scale.

Imperialism and colonialism

- It was on this basis that the European powers divided up the world, particularly in Asia and Africa at the end of the 19th century.
- In 1876, only 10% of the African continent was under European domination.
- By 1900, over 90% was colonized.

Imperialism and colonialism

- Thus, from the 19th to the early 20th century, the aim was to subject conquered colonial territories to the logic of capital (which does not mean making them resemble colonial metropolises), according to their resources (as indicated by certain names, inherited from the mercantilist era, such as Côte d'Ivoire).
- This made them extensions of the metropolitan economy.
- Even territories considered to be devoid of natural resources were so, because they were geostrategically interesting such as Palestine.

Imperialism and colonialism

- These colonial empires were managed in an authoritarian manner, almost exclusively for the benefit of the metropolis, sometimes through large concessionary companies that directed natural resources towards export, while violently overexploiting the indigenous population.
- The natives were denied the right to vote and many other rights.

Imperialism and colonialism

- European domination was direct, in the form of colonies and protectorates (sometimes with relative forms of autonomy).
- And also indirect, as in China, where European powers (plus the USA and Japan) had gradually taken control of the country's economy and finances through a system of concessions.
- Imperialism also governed relations within Europe, where there are dominant states (the Five Powers), and client states, the declining Ottoman Empire and the smaller Balkan nations.

Uneven and Combined Development

Uneven and combined development

- Another important idea is the question of uneven and combined development. Capitalism develops human productive forces on a global scale. But this development is not homogeneous, but uneven.
- Power relations change over time according to the development of each country, and so do alliances and the like.
- Imperialism is a form or expression of this uneven development, and imperialist forces also have uneven development.
- It is this uneven development that defines the global hierarchy of power. The uneven development of capitalism redistributes power between different states. The balance of power is therefore shifting and can change, creating the possibility of new conflicts.

Uneven and combined development

- Changes of this kind, Lenin insisted, make the peaceful transnational integration of capital impossible, in contrast to Kautsky's ultra-imperialism, in which the concentration of capital could lead to the harmonious functioning of the world economy, or the notion of Empire used by Negri and Michael Hardt.
- The redistribution of power between states weakens the agreements that would be necessary to make such integration work.
- This approach avoids two over-simplifications:
 - 1. presenting capitalism, despite the violence of its methods, as an agent of historical progress with an overall positive record;
 - 2. adopting a Third Worldist perspective *avant la lettre*, for whom capitalism would be radically incapable of sustaining a certain level of development in dominated countries.

Uneven and Combined Development

- The 2008 recession, which initiated a long period of stagnant profitability and accumulation, decisively buried the notion of a “seamless” world economy whose component parts were becoming increasingly homogeneous.
- The Global North remains the site of most of the capital-intensive, high productivity manufacturing that pays relatively high wages, and whose reserve army of labor is comparatively small compared to the “active” armies.
- Industry in the Global South remains for the most part labor-intensive, and its rate of productivity low while workers are paid extremely low wages; and the region’s reserve armies of labor are relatively enormous.

Heterogeneous forms and dynamics of Imperialism

Imperialism

- Imperialism must be understood in the context of the transformation and development of capitalism.
- The capitalist powers have divided up the world on the basis of their individual strengths: economic, financial, military and other.

Heterogeneous forms and dynamics of Imperialism

- This is why we also understand the heterogeneity of different imperialisms.
- For example, in Lenin's time tsarist imperialism was economically weak, and thus especially dependent on military power to safeguard the economic dominance of Russian capital across the tsarist empire.
- In comparison, British, German and U.S. capitals were all economically strong enough to exercise power beyond the bounds of the states they dominated; that was much less true of Russian capital. It is also less true today of Putin's Russia.

Heterogeneous forms and dynamics of Imperialism

- As for China, despite the strength and dynamism of its economy, its imperialism involves an exceptionally strong role for the state and ruling party. Paradoxically, Chinese capitalism owes much of its resilience to the anti-capitalist revolution that forged that state and ruling party.
- The European Union is at the opposite end of the imperialist spectrum from Russia: its economic strength is out of proportion to its military means.
- Yet as the saying goes, the EU is a giant with feet of clay. Militarily, the EU is still very much dependent on U.S. capabilities — aircraft carriers, for instance — to project military power to other parts of the world, or even to some extent within Europe. So while Europe exercises imperial economic power beyond the EU's borders, it is dependent on the United States to sustain that power militarily.

Heterogeneous forms and dynamics of Imperialism

- The key point here is that despite the differences between the United States and tsarist Russia, Lenin characterized them both as imperialist. We should do the same today with all the different imperialist powers.
- Similarly, Lenin distinguished between established imperialisms, which concentrated on defending the status quo, and rising, more aggressive imperialisms like Germany. Yet during the First World War, he refused to view more established powers like Britain and France as less imperialist — essentially the same position that Trotsky adopted regarding the Second World War.

Heterogeneous forms and dynamics of Imperialism

- Another important lesson from Lenin, he saw the main dividing line in the world as the one between all the imperialist powers, on the one hand, and the countries and regions dominated by imperialism, on the other.
- He saw this as a structural divide, based on ongoing relationships of economic subordination: imperial powers' dominant market and financial positions, their privileged access to raw materials, and so on. And this was mainly an economic divide, not a juridical one. That is, formally independent countries like China, Persia and Mexico, which Lenin called “semi-colonies,” were still dominated by imperialism.
- This division between dominant and dependent states also inform us of our political positions regarding for example in the case of Ukraine or of a colonial situation such as in Palestine

Conclusion

Conclusion

- Imperialism in the modern capitalist world today is the intersection of economic and geopolitical competition:
 - 1) Economic competition is a fundamental characteristic of capitalism.
 - 2) Geopolitical competition, competition between states seeking to assert, maintain or increase their power for various reasons, such as more territory, more wealth, etc...

Conclusion

- Imperialism as a system and not limited to one or few actors
- Heterogeneity of Imperialisms