

The Specificity of Imperialism

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“Imperialism,” David Harvey announced at a roundtable last year, should be seen as a “sort of metaphor, rather than anything real.” This came as quite a shock, not least because it was none other than Harvey himself who wrote one of the most acclaimed accounts of contemporary imperialism, *The New Imperialism*.

Harvey went on to explain that recent developments in capitalism – such as multinational corporations, technological networks, or shifts in the global division of labor – have raised enormous questions about how we understand imperialism today. What, for example, are we to make of the fact that Latin America is being turned into a massive soybean plantation, with most of the exports headed for China? Or, to take a similar, though even more drastic example that Harvey does not mention, how can we explain the fact that the single greatest U.S. export to China is soybeans, while China’s biggest export to the United States is computers? Does that make China an imperialist power? Is it extracting wealth from the periphery? Is the United States slipping into the periphery?

Reality, Harvey suggested, has become far too complicated for conventional models of imperialism. In fact, the concept of imperialism has become a kind of “straightjacket,” preventing us from really understanding new historical developments. Instead of trying to “cram all of this into a universal concept of imperialism,” we “need a new way of looking” at the world. For Harvey, that means we have to start by ditching the word “imperialism.”

Harvey is certainly right that most Marxist theories of imperialism have run into stumbling blocks trying to explain the richness of contemporary reality. I would go further to suggest that these limits are not actually new. In fact, from the start, most Marxist theories of imperialism had a difficult time offering an accurate account of historical developments. Even when their predictions seemed to be true, for example V. I. Lenin’s claim that capitalist rivalries were leading to world war, these theories were sometimes right for the wrong reasons.

For a time, these limitations were overlooked, not only because these theories did seem to explain some very important features of the late 19th and 20th centuries, but because “imperialism” doubled as both a scientific concept and as a popular rallying cry. In addition to its scientific function of attempting to explain historical reality, imperialism also served a number of incredibly important political functions. It named an enemy, united different struggles, and signaled a collective project to change the world. By the 1970s, imperialism was perhaps the most commonly used word in the radical vocabulary, but it was also one whose specific meaning was becoming increasingly unstable.

But by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the defeats of so many anti-imperialist struggles, alongside new and strange historical developments, forced many thorny questions – some old, others new – onto the table. Why was it that for many countries, colonialism preceded capitalism? How do we explain the fact that for many states, colonial expansion in the late 19th century was in many cases not primarily motivated by the search for

greater profits? How come many empires fought to retain their colonies even though the extreme violence they imposed on subjugated peoples did not really generate anticipated profits for the metropole? How was it that some peripheral countries supposedly doomed to perpetual “backwardness” came to develop highly advanced capitalist sectors? Why did newly independent countries themselves start to exhibit imperialist behaviors? Indeed, how do we make sense of the fact that in the 1970s three socialist countries in Southeast Asia threw themselves into what looked very much like an imperialist war?

These are only some of the questions that have challenged conventional theories of Marxism. The fact that these theories have often failed to offer convincing answers has led some to doubt the usefulness of the term. But the solution to the impasse is not, as Harvey suggests, to jettison the word “imperialism.” On the contrary, the concept of imperialism can still provide answers to these questions, make sense of recent developments, and help inform internationalist struggles today. But before that can happen, the concept of imperialism has to be modified. That means, first and foremost, rethinking some of the key assumptions of older Marxist theories.

The most fundamental of these assumptions, and what has become the primary weakness of most Marxist theories of imperialism, is the tendency to see imperialism as a symptom of the inevitable contradictions of capitalist development. For many of the classical theorists, the theory of imperialism was an extension of crisis theory. But even the later dependency theorists, like Andre Gunder Frank, who criticized some aspects of the classical theories, retained a similar assumption. For many of them, imperialism was more or less equated with the global expansion of capitalism.

Today, this automatic connection between imperialism and capitalism has become a commonplace. Yet it often rests on a kind of economic reductionism that simply cannot explain the overdetermined nature of imperialism. While imperialism may have economic motivations, it is always conditioned and propelled by a plurality of other, often contradictory, forces. This is why imperialist policies often seem so incoherent. This is why so often in history imperialism has actually worked against capital accumulation. And this is why many nation-states trying to free themselves from imperialism often found themselves exhibiting behavior that came dangerously close to the very imperialism they sought to abolish.

The key to developing a more accurate understanding of imperialism lies in finding a different starting point. As some other writers, such as Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, have suggested, instead of approaching imperialism as an extension of economic theories of capitalist expansion, and crisis theory more specifically, we should develop imperialist theory out of a theory of the state. Unsurprisingly, this was also the most under-theorized aspect of Marxist theories, especially the classical writings of the early 20th century. The economic reductionism of these theorists led them to treat the state as a mere instrument of capital, a transparent tool wielded by the dominant classes to do their bidding. As a result, they could only think of the state as that which realizes the interests of capital. In so doing, they completely erased the specificity of the state, and with it, that of imperialism.

In contrast to these earlier accounts, we have to see the state as an ensemble of contradictory institutions themselves traversed, and produced, by fierce struggles between and within classes. Approaching the state as a social relation, rather than as a thing, and seeing states as themselves embedded in contradictory, even antagonistic relations with each other, helps us refine the concept of imperialism. Imperialism, to anticipate the argument, has to be broadly understood as a relationship of domination between states, rather than as a synonym for capitalist expansion.

To be sure, we must continue to oppose both imperialism and capitalism, but it is precisely by insisting on their specificities, rather than conflating them into an undifferentiated whole, that we can better organize our struggles to overturn them.

The Classics

Between 1870 and 1900, the largest colonial powers came close to doubling the size of their territories. By the turn of the 20th century, over 90 percent of Africa had been forced under European colonial rule.

In 1902, the British journalist J. A. Hobson set out to explain this sudden burst of European colonialism. He did so by connecting it directly to capitalism. The growth of monopolies in the major capitalist countries, he argued, had led to a contraction of workers' disposable income. This led to a fall in consumption, which in turn foreshadowed an inevitable economic crisis at home. The capitalist solution to this crisis of underconsumption, Hobson claimed, was to export this surplus capital to the rest of the globe, with European states acting as the pliable instruments of these ravenous monopolies. It was this insatiable search for profits that led the European powers to carve up the globe and, ultimately, clash with one another. In fact, this was the specific meaning of the term "imperialism" for Hobson, as it would be for Lenin: the tendency for rivalries between capitalist countries, expressed most dramatically in colonial competition, to lead to war.

Although Hobson was himself not a Marxist, his writings set the tone for all the "classical" Marxist theories of imperialism that followed. In 1910, Rudolf Hilferding published *Finance Capital*, which further developed the theory of imperialism. One of his major contributions was to argue that bank capital and industrial capital had begun to fuse into what he called "finance capital." Finance capital, he argued, has "three objectives: (1) To establish the largest possible economic territory; (2) to close this territory to foreign competition by a wall of protective tariffs, and consequently; (3) to reserve it as an area of exploitation for the national monopolistic combinations." Finance capital, in short, forces the state to pursue a politics of geographical expansion.

Like Hobson and Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg also tried to locate imperialism in the contradictions of capitalism. In her 1913 magnum opus, *The Accumulation of Capital*, she argued that insufficient effective demand in the capitalist countries meant that capitalism had to seek out markets in the non-capitalist world to export surplus commodities. "Thus the immediate and vital condition for capital and its accumulation," she wrote, "is the existence of non-capitalist buyers of the surplus value, which is decisive to this extent for the problem of capitalist accumulation." Without these new consumers, excess surplus-value would not be realized, and capitalism would collapse.

The most famous of these classical theories was V. I. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Unlike these other texts, Lenin's primary goal was not to offer a scientific theory of imperialism, but to synthesize existing accounts into a focused political intervention. Against Karl Kautsky, who suggested that the imperialist countries could find a way to collaborate peacefully, Lenin argued vociferously that in his historical conjuncture, competition between capitalist states was leading inevitably towards world war. Drawing on Hobson and Hilferding, he argued that capitalism had become "over-ripe," compelling the giant monopolies said to be cropping up in Europe to export their capital to "backward" regions of the globe for higher rates of return. In fulfilling their interests, these monopolies pushed their respective states to carve up the world.

"Imperialism," he summarized, "is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed." Because of the unevenness of capitalism, this redivision of the globe between rival capitalist countries made war inevitable. There was, in other words, no chance that the imperialist powers would discover a way to bring about peace on their own. As a result, there could be no reformist solutions, no alliances with domestic bourgeoisies, no nationalist answers – only internationalist revolution against capitalism.

Despite very significant differences between these accounts, all the classical Marxist theories effectively treated imperialism as an extension of crisis theory. In their hands, imperialist theory amounted to a "radical theory of capital expansion," and their method of inquiry was to "identify certain contradictions in the accumulation process impelling capital outward." Imperialism, in other words, became a mere reflection of capitalist contradictions. The tendency reached its peak with Lenin, who not only saw imperialism as a consequence of the monopoly stage of capitalism, but, because of his very loose writing, seemed to simply equate imperialism with globally expanding capitalism as such. "Imperialism," he declared, in a formulation that has sown much confusion, "is the monopoly stage of capitalism."

This was especially unfortunate. Lenin's pamphlet was not only meant to serve as a mere "popular outline," as its subtitle makes explicit, it was designed to speak to a very specific conjuncture. Yet Lenin's enormous stature

after the Bolshevik revolution ensured that his little pamphlet would be codified as not only a general theory of imperialism, necessarily applicable in all contexts, but the orthodox theory of imperialism for the international communist movement. The consequences were enormous. For while Lenin's theory did play an important polemical function, sharply countering the reformist implications in Karl Kautsky's theory of imperialist coöperation by insisting instead on the necessity of internationalist revolution, it was itself riddled with weaknesses.

First, Lenin overstated the importance of monopolies. While some did appear to take hold in Germany, they played far less a role in Great Britain, which, after all, had the largest empire by far. But even in Germany, monopolies that completely dominated the market for a single commodity were not widespread.

Second, Lenin was wrong about capital exports as the driver of imperialism. The majority of capital exports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries traveled not from European countries to their colonies, but within the capitalist countries themselves. To take one example, in 1902, the year Hobson's study appeared, 36.42 percent of all French foreign investment went to Europe, 23.72 to Russia, and a meagre 3.43 percent to its colonial empire. What's more, even when capital was exported abroad, imperialist powers did not always seal their formal and informal colonies from firms operating out of rival countries.

Third, Lenin's theory relies on a periodization that makes it impossible to understand the historical specificity of imperialism. After all, Lenin, as everyone knows, famously called imperialism the "highest stage of capitalism." While it is true that this phrase, "highest stage," was a translation error, as Lenin's text was in fact initially published under the title *Imperialism, the Latest Stage of Capitalism*, it nevertheless confirms the stagism in Lenin's approach. Lenin tended to see imperialism as the attribute of an entire period of history beginning in the 1880s. In so doing, he ended up drawing too sharp a line between different conjunctures, making it very difficult to explain forms of imperialism before that decade, such as the British colonization of India, the French occupation of Algeria in the 1830s, or Great Britain and the United States' informal influence over Latin America. Moreover, his reliance on periodization as a way to explain phenomena, a habit shared by many Marxists in his time, tended to flatten very different forms of imperialism within the same historical conjuncture. Stagism in turn foreclosed the possibility of accounting for the overdetermined causes of imperialism even in his own time.

But the most significant theoretical problem with Lenin's account was his inability to adequately theorize the state. Admittedly, Lenin placed much greater emphasis on the role of states than other classical theorists. Unlike Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin, who tended to see capitalism as a unified global structure, Lenin insisted on the primacy of social relations within specific social formations, and therefore of specific states. Nevertheless, he, along with all the other classical theorists, treated states as the transparent instruments of capitalist monopolies. In explaining the actions of states, and imperialism as such, by more or less exclusively looking to the purported needs of capitalism, these theorists ended up in a kind of economic reductionism that made it impossible to theorize the overdetermination of the state.

Dependency

After the Second World War, a new set of imperialist theories took shape. Although in many ways adopting some of the assumptions of the classical theories, this new body of work began with a radical revision of a central Marxist claim.

Marxist theorists of imperialism had assumed that "backwards" countries subjected to imperialism were simply at earlier stages of development, and that they would, over time, progressively move through all the stages to capitalism. They would come to resemble the dominant social formations of North America and Western Europe, at least in fundamental respects. As Karl Marx himself once explained, "the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." Of course, we know that Marx's views on the matter changed, but one can nevertheless find passages that imply imperialism would, for better or worse, accelerate this trajectory in the colonies.

By the 1950s and 1960s, such a view was simply untenable. Most countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle

East, and East Asia had clearly taken a path very different from those in North America and Western Europe. Even formal political independence, which most Latin American countries had won in the 19th century, had not ushered in the kind of economic development most had expected. A new cohort of theorists, beginning with figures like Raul Prebisch and Celso Furtado, sought to not only explain why this had happened, but to find solutions to the problem of development. Their efforts would culminate in what came to be known as “dependency theory,” whose most famous early representative was Andre Gunder Frank. A parallel current, called “world systems theory,” shared many of the same positions, and included theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, and to some extent Samir Amin.

Of the many theorists that worked within the problematic of dependency, Frank became the most internationally renowned. The development of the wealthy capitalist countries, he explained, was not unrelated to the poverty of the poorer countries. The latter, in fact, was a consequence of the former. Backward countries were not “undeveloped,” that is, languishing in a kind of retarded state, their normal path to capitalist development blocked. Rather, they were actively “underdeveloped” by the developed capitalist countries. The development of the “core” and the underdevelopment of the “periphery” were part of the same global capitalist process.

At the center of what would become dependency theory lay the belief that around the 16th century a capitalist world system took shape, characterized by an international division of labor between the core and the periphery. In this system, the former forcibly extracted surpluses from the latter, driving the periphery into a state of dependency. Since this was a zero-sum game, in which the “metropolises tend to develop” and the “satellites to underdevelop,” the only way forward was for states to “delink” from the capitalist world system. Of course, what “delinking” would actually look like in practice depended on the political persuasion of individual theorists.

Dependency theory achieved a kind of hegemony in the 1970s, playing an important role in social movements in the Global South, as well as serving as the basis for major institutional projects, such as the New International Economic Order of the mid-1970s. Yet soon after, the theory, and Frank’s version in particular, came under heavy criticism.

Many, though by no means all, of the theorists working in this problematic adopted rather idiosyncratic definitions of capitalism that have very little to do with Karl Marx’s critique of political economy. Instead of following Marx, who argued that the capitalist mode of production generates surplus-value by paying workers less in wages than the value they generate when their labor-power is exploited at the point of production, some of these theorists, like Frank or Wallerstein, argued that capitalism is basically the transfer of income from one part of the world to another. It is a static, zero-sum game, based primarily in unequal exchange.

Furthermore, many of its predictions were disproved by historical events. Many theorists in this tradition argued it would be extremely difficult for capitalist development of the kind seen in the metropolises to take hold in the Global South, with others like Frank initially claiming this was simply impossible in the current world system. But history has shown otherwise. Already in the 1970s, several countries in the Global South, such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Iran, or Brazil, were developing quite spectacularly. Now, in the 21st century, we see a whole host of developed capitalist countries outside the conventional metropolitan core: India, China, Turkey, or Thailand, to name only a few.

Indeed, one of the major limitations of many of these theories is that they generally have difficulty accounting for unevenness. Accounts like Frank’s homogenize crucial differences between states into two general categories, seeing a globe divided into core countries and peripheral ones. More importantly, Frank’s analysis fails to account for the fact that individual social formations have been marked by extreme unevenness. In many countries, highly advanced capitalist relations exist alongside peasant economies, surplus populations, or massive black markets. For example, the United States, the most developed capitalist economy, is also one of the world’s largest agricultural producers.

But one of the key problems with many dependency theories, above all Frank’s, was confusion over the relationship between imperialism and capitalism. In fact, Frank, who was notoriously vague with his terms, often conflated them. At some points he simply combined the two into the concept of “capitalism/imperialism,” which he argued should be seen “essentially as a certain kind of relation between the metropole or its members

and the periphery.” “Capitalism/imperialism,” he argued, was the economic exploitation of the “underdeveloped periphery to the benefit of the developed metropole.” Not only did this definition do little to distinguish it from Frank’s concept of capitalism, it made it very hard to differentiate between different kinds of imperialism. U.S. imperialism, for Frank, just becomes another instantiation of the same centuries-old relationship: “This imperialism is an expression of the entire capitalist system today. Though differing in technical detail from its forerunners, it remains, especially for the underdeveloped world, essentially the same as all previous forms of capitalism-colonialism-imperialism: the source and systemization of exploitation and underdevelopment.”

For many working within the problematic of dependency theory, imperialism, if the term is even used at all, has simply come to mean the transfer of wealth from the periphery to the core, or even more broadly, the capitalist world system itself. From this perspective, it becomes very hard to differentiate imperialism from capitalism, and the two risk becoming synonymous. Despite refining the classical theories, many dependency theories have preserved this core weakness.

New Theories

Given the limitations of both the classical and dependency theories, newer accounts have tried to update, or even radically rethink, our understanding of imperialism. Some of these theorists have explicitly rejected the earlier theories. David Harvey, for example, has argued that the classical Marxist theories not only “do not provide an adequate framework for confronting our contemporary condition,” they were “not adequate to their time either.” Yet it is a testament to the tenacity of these older ideas that many new accounts, including Harvey’s own, end up in the very same problematic.

In his acclaimed 2003 book, *The New Imperialism*, Harvey argues that capitalism necessarily suffers from crises of overaccumulation. One solution for capitalists is to find areas “outside” of capitalism and make them available to that surplus capital. This can include geographical regions not previously open to capital, as in Luxemburg’s account, but it can also mean re-opening areas that have been closed off. The “outside,” in other words, can be created in the heart of capitalism. Harvey calls this process “accumulation by dispossession,” which includes everything from prying open new markets in the Global South to privatizing industries in North America and Europe. This, for him, is the meaning of contemporary imperialism: a solution to the crisis of the 1970s in which states use massive violence to force open areas for surplus capital.

Although Harvey’s core idea of “accumulation by dispossession” sheds considerable light on what is commonly called “neoliberalism,” it is far too expansive. For Harvey, the term includes the “speculative raiding of hedge funds”; the “patenting and licensing of genetic material, seed, plasma,” and other products; the “depletion of the global environmental commons”; the “commodification of cultural forms, histories, and intellectual creativity,” such as the music industry’s “appropriation and exploitation of grassroots culture and activity”; and the “privatization of hitherto public assets (such as universities), to say nothing of the wave of privatization (of water and public utilities of all kinds) that has swept the world.” In short, “accumulation by dispossession” refers to everything from dispossessing peasants in Nigeria to foreclosing on the homes of lower-middle class Americans who could not meet their mortgage payments. What, one may reasonably ask, is not “accumulation by dispossession?”

The key problem with this concept is not only that it is so expansive, but that it is made to include processes that are in fact quite normal to capitalism. Harvey is absolutely correct to argue that capital is limited in its ability to create the necessary conditions for its reproduction. Thus, state power is often required to help create, and maintain, those conditions. But it’s also true that in many cases capitalists can create those conditions on their own, without state power. Including this other set of processes within the same concept of “accumulation by dispossession” undermines its usefulness. As Robert Brenner argues in his critique of Harvey’s book:

The beating out by agribusinesses of family farms – who have already been living and dying by maximizing profits – is an all-too-familiar aspect of capitalist competition. It is hard to fathom why Harvey would want to assimilate this to accumulation by dispossession any more than he would

the destruction of family businesses (small or large) by giant corporations; likewise for the loss by Enron workers of their pensions along with their jobs when the firm went out of business. It deprives accumulation by dispossession of its substance to treat as the same sort of thing workers' loss of employment through their firm's bankruptcy, which is a standard result of a well-established process of capital accumulation, and the expropriation of peasants from their land – in the English enclosures of the eighteenth century or through the destruction of the ejidos in contemporary Mexico – which is about creating the conditions for capital accumulation.

In so doing, Harvey ends up losing the specificity of imperialism, making it virtually indistinguishable from capitalism. By making this move, Harvey finds himself right back within the very problematic from which he tried so hard to escape. Like all the classical theories, his own work basically reduces imperialism to crisis theory, as imperialism is once again regarded as a solution to a crisis of capital accumulation. Ironically, Harvey began his book by attempting to escape economic reductionism. Hoping to avoid reducing the state to the economy, he argues at the outset that there exist two logics of power: the “territorial” logic of state expansion, and the “capitalist” logic of accumulation. Leaving aside the problem of ascribing to the state a single logic, as if it were a monolithic entity with one invariable interest, Harvey never really explains the relationship between the two logics, and in the end, the capitalist logic largely instrumentalizes the state logic in his account. As in the classical accounts, the state becomes a kind of a tool wielded by capitalists to further their singular interest of capital accumulation.

But Harvey is not alone. Working from a tradition very different from Harvey's, Ellen Meiksins Wood also ends up in the same place. In *The Empire of Capital*, also published in 2003, Wood sets out to explain the historical emergence of what she calls “capitalist imperialism.” For Wood, what distinguishes capitalism is its primary reliance on economic compulsion to get workers to forfeit surplus labor, rather than extra-economic coercion, as in other societies. In the same way, what distinguishes capitalist imperialism from older forms of imperialism is the “predominance of economic, as distinct from direct ‘extra-economic’ – political, military, judicial – coercion” in securing the “transfer of wealth from the weaker nations to the stronger nations.” Of course, Wood is very quick to point out that this is not to say that capitalist imperialism never relies on violence, only that it relies predominantly on economic coercion, like structural adjustment policies.

Although in some respects distinct, Wood's theory retains the fundamental presuppositions of earlier models.
Imperialism

means that subordinate economies must be made vulnerable to the dictates of the capitalist market, by forcing them to open their markets to imperial capital and by means of certain social transformations – such as, for example, the transformation of peasants into market-dependent farmers, as subsistence agriculture is replaced by specialization in cash crops for the export market... Bringing about such social transformations – not simply by direct coercion but, for instance, by means of loans or aid with strict conditions – has been a major function of capitalist imperialism since its inception, and the indispensable instrument has been the nation state.

In other words, imperialism is the process through which “imperial capital” uses the nation-state to force open subordinate economies to the capitalist market as a way of transferring wealth from the weaker nations to the stronger nations. Capitalist imperialism is the point at which imperialism relies predominantly on economic coercion, though still drawing on extra-economic coercion, like war, to realize this goal.

As we have seen in other accounts, the relation between imperialism and capitalism here again borders on reductionism. From the core-periphery theories, Wood borrows the idea of imperialism as a unified world system defined by the transfer of wealth from one part of the world to the other. From the classical theories she takes the idea that imperialism is what happens when capital, in her account rendered as “imperial capital,” uses the state as an “instrument” to realize its interests. In all this, the state is once again left undertheorized, and the concept of imperialism collapses into capitalism.

Interestingly, it is none other than Harvey who has recognized this as the critical weakness of not only Wood's

account, but even his own. “Within this account,” he writes in a review of Wood’s book, “there lies the problem of how to understand the state and, on this point, neither Wood nor I did a very good job (I covered it over in the generic term of a territorial logic of power). Not only do we need a new theory of imperialism to match the conditions of our time but we also need a new theory of the capitalist state.”

Breaking with Economism

The primary weakness of most Marxist theories of imperialism, then, is precisely their tendency to overplay the causal relationship between capitalism and imperialism.

At their most extreme, these theories simply equate the two. For some, any expansion of capital beyond national borders is automatically classified as imperialism. For others imperialism is basically the same as the capitalist world system.

But if this is the case, why even use the word imperialism? After all, the concept of capital already implies its global expansion in search of self-valorization. Capital, in other words, always tries to move wherever it can find a higher rate of profit. For the same reason that a firm might move some of its operations from a city to another region of the same country to turn a higher profit, businesses might move to other countries. Calling normal processes of capitalism “imperialist” is not only redundant, it effaces the specificity of imperialism.

Other, less extreme views distinguish imperialism from capitalism, but see the former as immediately caused by the latter. State intervention abroad, for example, is often said to be at the behest of capital. Imperialism exists to realize capitalist interests. But if this is the case, then why is it that imperialism so often undermines the interests of capital?

In fact, historically speaking, the non-correspondence between imperialism and capitalism is the norm, not the exception. While some states certainly pursued imperialist actions because of foreign investment, raw materials, or markets, they also did so because they sought national glory, desired military outposts, hoped to divert internal social discontent by turning abroad, believed in spreading their allegedly enlightened civilization, or simply did not want potential colonies to fall into the hands of rival imperial powers.

In the late 19th century, the alleged highpoint of imperialism, Otto von Bismarck, for example, admitted that he intended to use colonies as bargaining chips in future negotiations over affairs in Europe, which were always his priority. During the same period, the renewed emphasis on empire in France was propelled not simply by economic motivations, but was also a result of France’s humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. At the same time, Great Britain, which certainly did scour the globe for resources, consumers, and investment opportunities, tried to control certain territories not for their intrinsic value, but because they helped to secure the route to India, their prize colony. In short, in every historical case, imperialism was overdetermined.

It is precisely the economic reductionism at the heart of so many Marxist theories of imperialism that prevents us from grasping the overdetermined nature of imperialism. If we want to move beyond this limit, we need a theory that does not see imperialism as mere reflection of capitalism. To do that, we have to reexamine the state.

The State

The state is conventionally understood as an ensemble of apparatuses organizing political authority over a territory that contains a more or less stable population. Different states possess different institutions, with different functions, procedures, and relationships with one another.

In social formations dominated by the capitalist mode of production, most states tend to develop institutions designed to manage the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations. A whole set of apparatuses work to protect private property, maintain infrastructures, control the money supply, mediate labor conflicts, and regulate social reproduction.

All states, whatever the character of their social formation, work to ensure overall social cohesion within their territories. This means maintaining unity within the ruling bloc, keeping dominated social forces fragmented and divided, crushing insurgencies, combating external threats, articulating potentially contradictory relations between different modes of production, and managing emergencies – such as depressions or natural disasters – that might jeopardize the society as a whole. This can be done through a variety of means, through the efforts of many different state apparatuses, and according to competing strategies, which is why these moments can often elicit contradictory responses.

Indeed, states are not monolithic. Although many of the institutions that compose a state may have been created with the same general objectives, they are structured differently, follow different procedures, and employ different strategies for resolving problems. In some cases, they may end up working at cross-purposes. In other cases, they may even have different objectives regarding a specific problem. Conflicts between, and even within, institutions, are extremely commonplace.

The state is not only composed of overlapping, and often competing, institutions, but it is also a primary site of class struggle. Most Marxist theorists of imperialism tend to treat the state as either a thing to be used by classes that stand outside of it or as an independent subject with its own logic perched above the class struggles raging in the society below. By contrast, the state can be better understood as a relationship. Or to be more precise, the state, in the words of Nicos Poulantzas, is the “material condensation of a relationship of forces.” This is to say, the state is not only an ensemble of apparatuses, but that ensemble is entirely traversed by struggles between different social forces. Class struggle should not be seen as external to the state, but as something inscribed in its heart.

Different social forces constantly compete with one another within the state. These incessant struggles between different classes, and even between different fractions of the same class, across the already contradictory institutions of the state is precisely why states often behave in erratic ways. State policy is frequently the product of a compromise between rival, or outright antagonistic, social forces. Different social forces pursue their own interests, different state institutions compete with one another, different branches or levels within the same apparatus disagree or even work at cross-purposes.

It should be added that it is precisely these struggles between social forces that not only determine the boundaries of state, but what practices, social relations, and institutions even get to count as “the state” in the first place. While states constantly present themselves as independent, substantial entities that behave as driving causes, they are only ever effects of relations of force that have been combined in the form of the state. The state as such is inseparable from specific configurations of social forces in struggle.

Seeing the state as a relationship of forces is crucial to refining our understanding of imperialism. It is precisely because the state is so thoroughly riddled with contradictions that imperialism often takes such contradictory forms. Since the state is traversed by struggles, different social forces within each of these distinct institutions will fight over different ideas about imperialism.

This is the key to explaining why states act in ways that undermine the interests of capital. Certainly some figures in the state may be interested in using state power to help those corporations with which they are affiliated. But others may want to use that same power to reshape the globe according to their worldview, which may end up cutting profits for some industries. Still others may simply take a certain action to appease their constituents, or shore up allies, even if they know it will be detrimental to U.S. capitalist interests.

Consider, for example, Donald Trump’s recent changes to the United States’ Cuba policy. Major U.S. businesses, from airlines to tech giants, from agribusinesses to the tourism industry, have long lobbied the White House to ease trade restrictions with Cuba. Trump himself searched for business opportunities on the island in 1998, flouting U.S. Treasury restrictions. When Barack Obama finally eased trade restrictions with Cuba, businesses were eager to get a piece of the pie. From a strictly economic point of view, then, Trump’s decision to tighten restrictions on trade and travel makes little sense. Indeed, it’s directly antagonistic to capitalist interests. Trump’s imperialist policies towards Cuba stem not from economic motives, but from a desire to secure the loyalty of older, conservative, Cuban-American voters, and more importantly, to solidify the support of import-

-ant political allies like Marco Rubio and Mario Díaz-Balart, especially now that Trump is finding himself increasingly isolated.

But even when representatives of the dominant capitalist classes seem to be in complete control, and to share the same general objective of expanding capitalism, they often represent competing industries, promote different strategies, and operate in different state apparatuses with different capacities. Since the state is not a monolithic entity, different institutions within the state, from the Treasury to the State Department to the CIA to the Senate, which are often controlled by different fractions of the ruling bloc, will often come into conflict over policy. The results are contradictory actions. We might think, for example, of the present U.S. government's foreign relations. One day the State Department gestures towards finding a settlement to the Gulf Crisis; the next, the President publicly throws his weight behind Saudi Arabia, aggravating tensions in the region. One day, the Secretary of State announces that the United States is ready to talk with North Korea without "preconditions," apparently revising the earlier demand that the DPRK commit to abandoning its nuclear project as part of negotiations; the next day, the White House contradicts the earlier message, asserting that "clearly right now is not the time" for talks.

Of course, the frequency and intensity of contradictions can change. There are historical moments when one fraction of the ruling bloc succeeds in asserting its hegemony over all the others, winning the consent of the other dominant social forces. In these cases, a given state's imperialist policies may appear more coherent for a time. At the same time, there are moments, as in the United States today, where the level of tension among the dominant social forces is extremely high. Not only is there outright disagreement between different factions of the ruling class, there are open contradictions within the administration itself, as different institutions propose wildly different solutions to the same crisis, producing a highly incoherent, even unpredictable, imperialism.

Lastly, states do not exist on their own, but within a wider field populated by many other states. Not only is each state shot through with contradictions, each state confronts well over a hundred other equally contradictory states. In reaching decisions, social forces within each state have to take into account the actions of social forces in other states, often leading again to very different strategies based on incomplete knowledge. In this way, the plurality of states across the globe compounds the already existing contradictions within each one.

No General Theory of Imperialism

In the same text in which he defined the state as the material condensation of a relationship of forces, Poulantzas quickly pointed out the limitations of state theorizing. "For just as there can be no general theory of the economy (no 'economic science') having a theoretical object that remains unchanged through the various modes of production," he wrote, "so can there be no 'general theory' of the state-political (in the sense of a political 'science' or 'sociology') having a similarly constant object." There is no such thing, in other words, as a theory of the state *tout court*.

The same can be said about the theory of imperialism. There is no single, general theory that could simultaneously explain every historical example of imperialism, from the Roman Imperium to the Mongol Empire to the United States today. Instead, each theory of imperialism is a theory of a specific conjuncture, potentially valid only for its moment, but always limited and subject to revision.

For this reason, abstractly reducing imperialism to capitalism, as so many theorists do, actually prevents us from developing concrete investigations into historically specific forms of imperialism. For while there is always a relationship between imperialism and a specific mode, or more often a combination, of modes of production, the precise nature of this relationship cannot be determined in advance, dogmatically as it were, but can only be studied conjuncturally.

We can take the example of U.S. imperialism. After World War II, many sectors of the U.S. ruling bloc argued that the best way to advance the perceived interests of the United States was for the state to play a dominant role in creating the conditions for the enlarged reproduction of the capitalist mode of production on a global scale. Of course, U.S. imperialism remained contradictory during this time, appearing differently in different

places, but for many decades, protecting, expanding, and imposing capitalism remained a primary objective. In practice, this meant containing, and confronting, the socialist world. It meant making certain that everything was running smoothly in the capitalist world. And, most importantly, it meant preventing newly independent countries from gravitating away from capitalism, which often involved resorting to extreme violence. Exactly how the U.S. did this depended on the specific conjuncture. In some cases, keeping newly independent countries within the capitalist sphere meant pouring millions of dollars of aid into “development” programs. In other cases, it meant punishing them with coups, invasions, or unmanageable debt. Yet in still other cases, contradictions within the state led U.S. imperialism to deviate from this objective altogether.

The point is that while we can sketch the broad outlines of the relationship between imperialism and capitalism in the United States for some decades after 1945, that does not allow us to make general statements about U.S. imperialism across time, and still less about other forms imperialism beyond the United States. As this example shows, decoupling the concept of imperialism from capitalism, then, does not at all mean abandoning the “economic”; it opens the space to develop concrete inquiries that more accurately grasp the specificity of different forms of imperialism.

Imperialism as a Relationship

Insisting on historical specificity does not suggest that insights gleaned from a careful conjunctural analysis may not hold any broader value. Indeed, as Poulantzas himself pointed out, while there is no general theory of the state as such, “we may, of course, put forward general theoretical propositions concerning the State.” But these, he added, “would have the same status as those of Marx relating to ‘production in general’: that is, they could have no claim to the status of a general theory of the State.” Similarly, while studying specific conjunctures, we may make general propositions about imperialism, all while keeping in mind their provisional, limited status as guides to further research.

Here, I wish to put forward just one of these general theoretical propositions on imperialism: imperialism is not a thing, but a relationship. Indeed, if the state is a relationship between social forces, then imperialism could be broadly understood as a relationship between states, though of course the causes, meanings, and specific forms of these relationships vary historically.

Imperialist relations can include everything from sanctions to adjusting monetary policy to refusing to recognize another régime to orchestrating coups to military invasion to outright annexation. Accordingly, colonialism should be seen as one form of imperialism, and one that has not entirely vanished despite the anti-colonial wave of the 1960s and 1970s. By the same token, what is sometimes called “neo-colonialism” refers to a category of imperialist relationships that do not involve territorial annexation, but are based on other forms.

There is often a tendency, among theorists and historians alike, to treat these different forms of imperialism as stages. The outright annexation of colonialism is supposed to be succeeded historically by the more subtle forms of coercion grouped under “neo-colonialism.” Instead, we should think of all these different forms as part of an imperialist repertoire available to dominant social forces within states. In some cases, states may pursue one form of imperialism; in other cases, they may shift to another form. Of course, while the social forces with the power to shape imperialist relations can pursue different forms of imperialism, they cannot do whatever they wish. These forces must operate within a certain field of possibility necessarily circumscribed by a wide range of factors, such as the level of resistance in the polity subjected to imperialism, availability of local collaborators, the balance of forces at home, the history of the region, or the particular state’s standing in the international system. But within this field of possibility, there are almost always choices.

As many historians of imperialism have shown, this is how empires actually operated historically. In some cases, they pushed for outright annexation. In others, they decided that a kind of “informal imperialism” was more effective and less costly. The ruling classes of some imperialist states, like the French, were more open to annexing territories than others. Those in the United States, by contrast, tended to prefer maintaining imperialist control without formally annexing dominated polities. But in all cases, there was debate, often fierce disagreement, within ruling classes over exactly how they should proceed. The resultant form of imperialism was often a confusing, tenuous compromise.

Imperialist relationships are never unidirectional. The peoples of dominated states can have an enormous impact on the dominant state. This was especially clear in those historical cases when imperialism took the form of colonial annexation. Some empires, such as the French, created deep bonds between colonizer and colonized, often with unintended consequences for the metropole. For that reason, colonial administrators frequently took great pains to negotiate all manner of boundaries, especially those having to do with citizenship, race, gender, and sexuality.

Politically, although one state always assumes the dominant position in an imperialist relationship, the social forces active in the dominated state can always struggle to adjust the terms of the relationship. In some cases, these efforts could not only revise the imperialist relationship, but force dramatic transformations in the metropole itself. After all, struggles in Algeria ultimately triggered the collapse of the French Fourth Republic in the late 1950s, while national liberation in Lusophone Africa led to revolution in Portugal in the mid-1970s. But this dynamic can even be perceived in non-colonial imperialist relations. Vietnamese resistance to American imperialism, for example, caused substantial turmoil in the United States, supercharging domestic social movements, forcing President Lyndon Johnson not to seek re-election, and ultimately realigning political forces in the country.

The Boundaries of Imperialism?

In criticizing the economic reductionism of the inherited theories, we must also avoid the mistake of bending the stick too far the other way. Insisting on the specificity of imperialism should not mean treating imperialism as something completely autonomous from particular modes of production in particular, nor from a social formation in general.

To begin with, the state has always been bound up with modes of production, each present in the other's reproduction. In this sense, the state apparatuses, and the social forces within them, have always engaged in a whole range of activities one might call "economic." In the capitalist mode of production, states sponsor technological development, manage the flow of money, restructure industry, provide training, assist in the reproduction of labor-power, shape the composition of the working class, set the terms of employment, and can even nationalize industries. The same can be said with regard to imperialism: states control monetary policy, tariffs, copyright law, sovereign debt, assistance to corporations abroad, regulation of commodities crossing borders, and so forth. While it is no longer tenable to argue, as the classical theorists once did, that finance capital compels states to conquer territories abroad, finance, in particular, remains a fundamental aspect of imperialism. Indeed, in our age of sovereign debt crises, as countries like Greece find themselves indebted to other European states, it is clear that finance has come to play a crucial role in reproducing the hierarchical configuration between states.

More importantly, the very separation between the state and society should not be understood as an absolute and transhistorical dividing line between two distinct substances, but rather as a constructed division within a single social formation. The state, in this view, is not really a substance, but a kind of "structural effect." The state may present itself as separate, standing above society, but it is in fact nothing but the product of social relations.

Seeing the state in this way helps us account for the fact that all too often the line between the state and society blurs. Think, for example, of how some key functions of the state, like prisons, are being privatized today. Much the same can be said about imperialism: the line between imperialism and other social relations is often highly fluid. To take only one case, Timothy Mitchell has pointed to the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) to highlight the messy boundaries between the state and private capitalist firms. Today, consider the fact that imperialist projects often rely on mercenary armies, NGOs, or other forms of private governance. If we understand imperialism today as a hierarchical relationship between nation-states, where do these entities fit?

The proliferation of these bodies, institutions, and practices raise important questions, and establish an important agenda for research. Above all, they point to the need to study the constantly shifting relationships

between imperialism and other social relations. But their existence does not mean that imperialism does not exist, in the same way that private prisons do not prove that the state has ceased to exist. Denying the existence of the state would be as foolish as fetishizing it into singular substance. If the state is ultimately a material condensation of struggles, even if it is not separable from particular configurations of social relations, it nevertheless still designates a specific terrain of struggle. For that reason, it is strategically imperative that we pinpoint what at a given moment counts as the state, where its boundaries lie, how it relates to social relations said to stand outside its borders, and how the separation between the state and society is being reproduced at that specific conjuncture.

The same can be said about imperialism. While we know that imperialism often relies on institutions said to lie beyond the state, and while we recognize that the boundaries dividing it from other social relations are always constructed, shifting, and the product of struggles, it is still necessary to insist on the specificity of imperialism as distinct from, say, the capitalist mode of production. Decoupling the reductionist link between imperialism and capitalism, though making certain not to treat imperialism as a wholly autonomous substance, allows us to draw a more accurate picture of the present, better understand the specificity of different terrains of struggle, and pose new questions and open up new fields of research. This kind of work is all the more important today, as radical movements are resurging across the globe, including the United States – still the most dangerous imperialist power on the planet. A strong socialist movement in this country is impossible without a firm and unwavering commitment to overthrowing imperialism in all its forms. To do that, however, we need a clearer idea of exactly what we are up against. This means detailed investigations into the concrete dimensions of contemporary imperialism in all its forms. And that means grasping the specificity of imperialism, recognizing what it is and what it is not.