

Nation, Imperialism, War.
A critique of mainstream theories of imperialism

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In this paper I am going to stress three points as part of a broader critique of mainstream theories of imperialism, classical and contemporary.

1. On the alleged *non-correspondence* between state and capital in the era of so-called monopoly capitalism

I will start from a position shared by almost all mainstream theories of imperialism according to which as individual capitals from the imperialist countries develop on a geographical terrain that greatly transcends the borders of the state of origin, an economic space is shaped whose geography does not coincide with the fragmented political geography of capitalist states. What is implied, in other words, is a relationship of *non-correspondence* between state and capital. And this relationship of non-correspondence implies to a significant extent that the “laws” of capitalism are *global* in nature.

There are two alternative ways in which this insight might be expressed:

On the one hand it may be accepted that as capital expands beyond the political boundaries of the state, it does not on that account cease to be the “possessor” of its original state-related identity. This interpretation brings back to the fore the classical argumentation on imperialism, which stresses the importance of states in “supporting” the expansion and internationalization of “their capital”.

On the other hand, it could be argued that capital no longer retains the characteristics of its origin and its movement creates global economic-political structures that subordinate states thereto.

Both versions of this argumentation fail entirely to perceive the state as what it is in reality: the factor that underwrites the cohesion of capitalist society, the ideal collective capitalist who solidifies the class interest of all individual capitals which produce surplus value in a capitalist social formation. As Engels stressed, “The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist

machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal aggregate-social capitalist” (*Anti-Dühring*, Part III, Ch. II).¹

States and capital are represented as distinct social “agents”. Therefore, all non-correspondence approaches fail to grasp that *capital is a social relationship that is reproduced in a complex way in the framework of a specific social formation*. Two basic observations become pertinent at this point.

First, according to Marx’s argument, isolated individual capitals within a social formation, are transformed *through competition* (and not through the political influence of the state exercised from outside, as, e.g. Hardt and Negri [2000: 304-5] mistakenly maintain), into elements of *aggregate-social-capital (Gesamtkapital)*. Contrary to Hilferding’s belief, which has been adopted by mainstream theories of imperialism, according to which so-called “monopoly capitalism” has led to “the elimination of free competition among individual capitalists by the large monopolistic combines” (Hilferding 1981: 301), Marx’s theory makes clear that free competition is a *structural feature* of the capital relation, which clearly cannot be abolished. He writes:

“production founded on capital for the first time posits itself in the forms adequate to it only in so far as and to the extent that free competition develops [...] Free competition is the real development of capital. By its means, what corresponds to the nature of capital is posited as external necessity for the individual capital; [...] it is the *free*, at the same time the *real* development of wealth as capital” (Marx 1993: 650-1).

Through this mutual dependence, that is to say their constitution as aggregate-social-capital, the individual capitals *acquire the status of a social class and function as an integrated social force that opposes, and dominates, labour*. In contrast, then, to what is resolutely asserted in historicist analyses (for example see Gill [2003: 168], Cox [1999: 137], Hardt and Negri [2000: 305-324], Pijl [1998: 49-64], see also Panitch and Gindin [2003]) *there is most definitely a concrete general class interest of aggregate-social-capital, despite the potential for significant intra-capitalist tensions*. In this light it is in no way possible for sections or fractions of an aggregate-social-capital to *break away* from the aforementioned unity to form a transnational capitalist class or transnational historic bloc or even to be metamorphosed into entities non-correspondent with some specific collective capitalist.

¹ „Der moderne Staat, was auch seine Form, ist eine wesentlich kapitalistische Maschine, Staat der Kapitalisten, der ideelle Gesamtkapitalist“.

Second, a comprehensive critique of the “non-correspondence” problematic must include the thesis that the creation of *aggregate-social-capital* out of all the individual capitals that accumulate within a social formation *is a process unrelated to the legal forms of existence (state property, foreign property) of each individual capital*. For the overwhelming majority of writers on this subject, the decisive factors behind the emergence of a global mode of production are transnational corporations and the internationalization of financial markets. The conception of territorial non-correspondence of the state and capital tacitly assumes either that an individual capital never loses the *state-origin* that is ascribed to it by legal property forms or that it can function as capital quite independently of any social formation.

In contrast to this, Marx’s theory suggests that the legal property forms of the means of production do not necessarily correspond to the real property relations of the means of production. This is the situation above all in the case of stock companies, which supposedly belong to their shareholders as a whole, and/or to state enterprises, which supposedly belong to society as a whole. Something similar applies in the case that interests us here, that of enterprises legally belonging to a foreign or international trust but functioning productively inside a specific social formation, as part of the overall (national) social capital. Marx himself took an interest in this:

“But the circumstance that some means of labour are fixed in location, with the roots in the soil, gives this part of the fixed capital a particular role in a nation’s economy. They cannot be sent abroad or circulate as commodities in the world market. It is quite possible for the property titles to this fixed capital to change; they can be bought and sold, and in this respect circulate ideally. These property titles can even circulate on foreign markets, in the form of shares, for example. But a change of the persons who are the owners of this kind of fixed capital does not change the relationship between the static and materially fixed part of the wealth of a country and the movable part of it” (Marx 1992: 242).

As formulated here by Marx, the key aspect of the question of ownership of “foreign” capital is as follows. Although foreign legal ownership is retained, this capital is incorporated into the process of capitalist accumulation inside the host country, becoming integrated into that country’s aggregate social capital. The means of production belong to the country’s aggregate-social-capital, utilizing the domestic workforce (exactly like every other individual capital inside the country); the value of the commodities produced is expressed in the local currency. As aptly observed by Neusüss (1972: 150) “what is involved are capital exports that are obliged to behave as national capital abroad because the capital functions as productive capital in its host country”.

Let us reiterate: The basic presumption of the above-mentioned approaches is rejection of a crucial concept in Marxist analysis: the *concept of aggregate social capital (Gesamtkapital)*. This rejection has significant consequences for the way of understanding how class power is organized within a social formation and so the way in which we should understand the phenomenon of imperialism. A Marxian theoretical strategy should definitely take into account this central concept.

2. The imperialist chain as critique of global capitalism

The idea that imperialist capitalism becomes a global system predominated the revolutionary wing of the Social Democracy during World War I. This perception determined the stance of the Left towards the movements of national self-determination that were developing in the various countries, and disputed in one way or another the right of nations to self-determination (Lenin, *CW*, vol. 22). Among the theoreticians of imperialism, Rosa Luxemburg openly opposed political support for national self-determination (s. Luxemburg 1961). And Nikolai Bukharin, too, even after the Russian Revolution kept his distance from the demand for national self-determination.² As is well known, Lenin came out against this strategy. His opposition to it led him finally to a break with the theory of global capitalism and to formulate the concept of the *imperialist chain*.

The whole conception of the imperialist chain presupposes the “correspondence” between capital and the state contrary to the non-correspondence systematization put forward by the classical imperialist theories. The interaction between the historically formed *multiplicity* of aggregate-social-capitals and capitalist states at the global level, result in formation of an *international* economic and political space (the *imperialist chain*) linking together the different aggregate-social-capitals and capitalist social formations. A particular social formation depends on the way in which the “external” situation (that is to say the international interconnectedness of the different capitalist social formations) *over-determines* but also *constrains* the practices that emerge out of the evolution of the internal class correlations.

We can understand this using an example from Lenin’s analysis. Lenin argued that in the first phase of the Russian revolution the intervention of “imperialism”, that is to say of the superpowers England and France, significantly strengthened the prospects of the revolution:

² “I want to recognise only the right of the working classes to self-determination,” says Comrade Bukharin. That is to say, you want to recognise something that has not been achieved in a single country except Russia. That is ridiculous” (Lenin, Eighth Congress of the R.C.P.[B.] March 18-23, 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/rcp8th/03.htm>; *CW*, vol. 29).

“The West-European bourgeoisie had always been opposed to revolution. Such was the situation to which we had been accustomed. But things turned out differently. The imperialist war split the European bourgeoisie, and this created a situation where the Anglo-French capitalists, for imperialist reasons, became supporters of a Russian revolution. [...] The revolution has thus gained an unexpected ally. As a result, the revolution has turned out to be different from what anyone expected”.³

If we generalize this observation to the totality of the links in the imperialist chain, we arrive at the manner in which on each occasion the international conjuncture is constructed. The latter is incorporated in a complex way as a secondary contradiction (in the sense that it does not have priority over class struggle) within the social formations, meaning that the position (in terms of power) of every state that is a link in the chain, and the margins of opportunity for its imperialist action, are *determined by the overall internal class correlations, which are in turn already over-determined by the international conjuncture*. The structure of the imperialist chain has two arguable consequences.

On one hand, it is the terrain on which a variety of state strategies, often contradictory and incontestably unequal in power, are constituted. These strategies are linked to the interests of each individual collective capitalist and play a mutually complementary role in the state’s “internal functioning”. These strategies will never radically draw into question the global flows of commodities and capital, that is to say the capitalist nature of the international economic sphere. They will simply demand different versions of the terms on which the game must be played. In any case the global market is inextricably associated with the capital relation. The contribution it makes to its reproduction is crucial. The antagonisms in question are those between the various aggregate-social-capitals, which certainly have a potent political aspect. Indeed to the extent that military power is a distillation, and a guarantor, of all political power, this antagonism is also metamorphosed into military antagonism (of various forms).

On the other hand, the complex game within the parameters of *the imperialist chain also operates reflexively when it comes to its effect on the links*. Here we are dealing with the other side of the same coin. The unequal links in the imperialist chain have in common a certain shared strategic interest: *reproduction of the capitalist system of domination*. However great the sharpening of the geopolitical or economic conflicts, they will never *on their own* go so far as to reverse this constant. The chain must be reproduced as capitalist. Every state as it delineates its strategy in the international area, that is to say on a terrain where all correlations are in flux, contributes in the final

³ The Petrograd City Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. (Bolsheviks) April 14-22 (April 27–May5), 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/petconf/14.htm#v24zz99h-141-GUESS>, *CW*, vol. 24.

analysis to the reproduction of capitalism. Striving to promote its own state interest, in other words, it helps to reproduce capitalism as a stable relationship of power.

I will thus define imperialism as the expansionist tendencies and practices of each and every capitalist social formation (link of the imperialist chain), emerging out of the structures of the capitalist mode of production. The historical form that these tendencies will ultimately acquire for a particular social formation depends on the way in which the “external” situation (that is to say the international correlation of forces) *over-determines* but also *constrains* the practices that emerge out of the evolution of the internal class correlations.

3. Nationalism as a new era within capitalist social formations. The nation as state-instituted “popular will” promoting imperialism

A turning point in the history of capitalist social formations was the emergence of nationalism since the first half of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the American and French Revolutions, a process which resulted in the formation of modern nations.

Nationalism (the nation) creates a rupture and a new situation within the capitalist social formations in which it develops, and profoundly rearranges the way populations (social classes) are subjected to capitalist power relations, while inaugurating the era of “citizenship”, as well as political and social rights. But this radically new era of rights and popular representation, the era of nationalism, is also an era of racism (which, under certain circumstances, may also lead to ethnic cleansing).

Following Hobsbawm (1992) and Milios (2023) as regards the era of nations, the following theses can be posited:

(a) the nation is a *social relation* that was formed subsequent to the French Revolution in Europe, in most cases in the nineteenth century, and (b) which is a condensation and outcome of *nationalism*; (c) nationalism is produced as a *politicisation of the masses*, a (d) politicisation which is connected with the radical modification of the *mode of integration of the masses* (the social classes subject to capitalist power and exploitation) *into the state*; (e) *nation and (capitalist) state* do not coincide, but are inextricable, being two sides of the same coin: the nation, as a derivative of nationalism, by definition constitutes a *demand for* and a *claim to a state*, while the nation as a “people” is also institutionally organised by the state (“popular sovereignty”: the “will of the

nation” that is expressed through the state and the institutions of “democracy”); (f) nationalism is inherently characterised by a tendency towards racism.

The emergence of modern nations is thus affiliated with unprecedented institutional and state-related changes: institutions of representation and novel ways of integrating populations into the state, political parties, constitutional order (or the prospect thereof), irredentism and national “cleansing”, etc. With the national politicisation of populations (the domination of nationalism), “modern times” entered a new phase which at first glance appeared irreversible; in other words, it appeared to have slipped past the “point of no return”. “If we were to declare that we do not recognise any Finnish nation ... that would be sheer nonsense. We cannot refuse to recognise what actually exists”, wrote Lenin in 1919 (Lenin, *CW* vol. 29: 174).

The nation as *the national politicisation of the masses*, is related to the interior of a state territory, as demand for political rights – and yet for national “clarity” and “purity” as well –, and to its exterior, as demand for the expansion of state influence and often for a “correction” of its borders. And this national politicisation of the masses expresses the historically fresh, “modern” form of their subsumption (of the ruled, dominated classes) under capital and the capitalist state, whose permanent function is to integrate class antagonisms into “national unity”, while in tandem immersing the state in popular support and strengthening its expansionist-imperialist strategies.

In this sense, the nation is “the people of a state”. We can thus recognise that the tendency towards the national homogenisation of populations, is a totalitarian tendency which does not only act “inwards”, within an administrative territory and the corresponding population (and any “minorities” located in the territory where that population lives); it acts at the same time “outwards”, seeking to expand where it does not encounter considerable (national) resistance, to integrate and homogenise other population groups, subjecting them to a prospectively expanding nation state. In another formulation, we would say that this totalitarian tendency contains not only an inward-looking trend, that is, the normalisation-homogenisation of a nation, but also an outward-looking trend, i.e. nationalist expansionism. “History” coined by state apparatuses, i.e., the supposed ancestral “national character” of the claimed or disputed territories, feeds this extroverted trend of the “totalitarian tendency”.

As a nation state exists in order to express the “will of the nation”, the social differences that traverse society are obscured. More aptly put, the nation becomes a “union of antagonistic classes”, of those doing the exploiting and those who submit to the exploitation, of those dominating and those being dominated, while class conflict takes place beyond the visible realm. In fact, when this class conflict eventually takes on manifest forms, they are often attributed by all parties involved to

being characteristics of the nation: “foreign-instigated sedition”, “oligarchy serving foreign interests”, “traitors”, etc.

All of the foregoing highlights the fact that when one speaks of nationalism and the nation, one is not only speaking of “ideas”, but mostly of “*the sovereign people*” and *the state*, or of the totality of the social classes as it is homogenised within the institutions of a capitalist state.

The demand for “national unification and integration” is often the motive force for annexation of territories where a minority of fellow-nationals of the country carrying out (or attempting) the annexation exists, or – as is even more likely – predominates economically and/or culturally, or else where the national culture is supposed to have been present in the historical past.

With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the “national question” and conflict has once again come to the fore, as was, e.g., with Germany’s territorial demands at the beginning of World War II: Nowadays, regardless of the perspective one adopts on the war in Ukraine, the “national” dimension of this war cannot be ignored: Let us say, the oppression by the Ukrainian state of that part of the Russian nation living in Ukraine, or the one or other national character (Russian or Ukrainian) of Crimea and the regions of Lugansk, Zaporizhzhya, etc., or, from a different perspective, the attempted subordination of (part of) the Ukrainian nation to Russia ...

So, whatever position one adopts, whoever is considered the main culprit of the war conflict (US-NATO imperialism, Ukrainian nationalism and fascism, Russian imperialism and expansionism), at the same time an unresolved “national issue” in the region is recognised. An issue related to the existence of different nations (Ukrainians and Russians) in certain southeastern territories of the Ukrainian state, and the development (or “incitement”) of hostility and conflict between them.

Capitalism is not simply “capital accumulation”; it is a system of economic, political and ideological domination of the ruling class over the working class and social majority. What theories of imperialism very often fail to recognise, is the role of the nationalism of the masses since the transformation of the capitalist state and society from the ancien régime of capitalist rule to a modern capitalist nation-state based on constitutionalism and parliamentarism. Constitutionalism and bourgeois representational democracy, nurturing the nation, i.e., nationalism, is the new, modern form of subsuming the masses into capitalist power relations. In other words, the social majority of the working class and the intermediate strata is, in “normal times” (and under “normal” conditions), “recruited” by way of the workings of the state apparatuses, as well as by the ruling ideology, into the “visions” and expansionist-imperialist strategies of the rulers, in many cases acting through nationalism as catalysts, fuelling these strategies.

The nation (nationalism) has not only changed the capitalist state and the framework in which

the inherent in capitalism imperialist tendencies develop. It has also changed warfare, as it enabled the formation on the one hand of enormous national armies and on the other of soldiers ready to sacrifice their lives just for the sake of the fatherland. Friedrich Engels stressed the novel characteristics of warfare in the era of nations, in the wake of the French Revolution:

“The modern warfare is the necessary product of the French Revolution. Its precondition is the social and political emancipation of *the bourgeoisie and small peasants*. The bourgeoisie provides the money, the small peasants supply the soldiers. [...] [T]he degree of wealth and education connected with this stage of social development is equally required in order to provide the material in the way of weapons, munitions, provisions, and so on, necessary for modern armies, and in order to provide the required number of trained officers and to give the soldier himself the required degree of intelligence” (Engels, 1851: 550).

Historical development cannot be adequately explained on the basis of the “initiatives” or the “interests” of “great powers” or multinationals. Despite the fact that the links of the imperialist chain are of unequal strength, meaning that the superpowers can claim the lion’s share in the quest for international influence, they are also subject to the causal relations inherent in the capitalist mode of production and to the relationship of class forces (internal and international) that is formed in each specific historical conjuncture. In this way, we are able to find an interpretation for a whole series of developments which obviously involve actors other than the “great powers”: the Iran-Iraq war, the wars in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and the creation of new nation-states, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon from May 2000 to April 2005, the Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia from 1978 to 1989, the India-Pakistan conflict, the Cyprus problem, the rise and fall of the “Islamic State” etc. (For more on these issues, see Milios and Sotiropoulos 2009; Part III).

If a “nationally thinking” Left identifies only the imperialism of the “Great Powers” and foremost “American imperialism” as enemy “of the peoples”, it is because it has long been in a state of compromise with (local) capitalist power and exploitation, which it seeks to embellish and promote in the name of “national rights”, “national independence”, “economic development”, and so on.

4. A concluding remark

To recapitulate the above analysis, I would say that a theory of imperialism, if based on Marx's theory of capitalism, must adopt a broader definition of imperialism. This definition should refer to the expansionist tendencies (economic, political and ideological) inherent in every system of capitalist power (in every capitalist social formation), giving special interest to the question of nationalism and national conflict.

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