

Rethinking Imperialism: A Study of Capitalist Rule

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For over a century “imperialism” has been a key concept in Left theory and politics, connoting both the aggressiveness and the characteristics of modern capitalism. This book aims at presenting and assessing imperialism as a theoretical concept. Since a variety of different definitions are assigned to the concept of imperialism, it is necessary to put to the test the rigour of these definitions. The authors of this volume provide a comprehensive evaluation, focusing especially on the tension between Marx’s theoretical system of the *Critique of Political Economy* and the theories of capitalist expansion and domination that emerge out of the various discourses on imperialism.

The book critically reviews all major (classical and contemporary) theories of imperialism. The authors embark on a critical interrogation of all innovations introduced into theoretical Marxism by theories of imperialism (for example those concerning the stages of historical evolution of capitalism, the capitalist state, internationalization of capital, crises etc.). They show that most of these theories deviate from the theoretical system formulated by Marx, especially in *Capital* and his other mature economic writings.

Furthermore, these theories seem to poorly interpret historical development. Is there a theory of the capitalist state to justify the thesis that the collapse of colonialism after World War II is so insignificant to the periodization of international capitalist relations (or “global capitalism”) that the “final stage” of capitalism commencing in the last decades of the 19th century is arguably still continuing? To pose the same question differently: on what theoretical grounds can the “early” colonialism, as opposed to the late colonial era (from the late 19th century to World War II), be bracketed off as a distinct period in the history of capitalism? On grounds of Marx’s theory of the CMP this period now has to be revisited. Why does the second colonial period have more affinities with the present-day non-colonial post-World War II era than with the era of early colonialism? Last but not least, is there a tendency towards expansionism that is innate in every form of capitalist domination, i.e. also in the less developed capitalist states that are not to be classified as being in the supposedly “ripe” or “monopoly capitalist” stage?

The authors propose a conceptualization of the international level which comes into a striking contrast with the majority of contemporary approaches of globalization or “new imperialism”. Their interpretation perceives the international level as a complex interlinkage of different (national-state) economic and social structures, each of which evolves at a different and unequal rate as a result primarily of the different class and political correlation of forces that have crystallized within it.

The book addresses the contemporary contradictions and trends of development of the “international capitalist system” and the evolving global economic crisis, formulating a fundamental reinterpretation of imperialism. Important in this line of reasoning remains the notion of *imperialist chain*, which is formulated in accordance with Marx’s concept of *social capital* and his theory of the capitalist mode of production. It thus defends the thesis that internal-national relationships and processes always have priority over international relations.

It is precisely the fundamental discovery of Marxism that the class struggle (which is at the same time economic, political and ideological and is thus consummated within each national-state entity) is the driving force of history. It is through these class correlations and relations of domination that international relations, with all the concomitant interdependence on other social formations, take effect. If imperialism is a permanent possibility emerging out of the structures of the capitalist mode of production, the historical form it 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.

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