

What really is imperialism?

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If imperialism is lingering on, how come colonialism has ended? And if domination is imperialism's defining characteristic, how one can differentiate between national oppression and imperial exploitation? One also wonders if empire and imperialism are concomitant, should Roman, Mongol, Islamic, and Ottoman empires also qualify as imperialisms?

'Imperialism is a word that trips easily off the tongue. But it has such different meanings that it is difficult to use it without clarification as an analytic rather than a polemical term,' says Harvey (2003:26).

Edward Said, for instance, in his seminal work 'Culture and Imperialism' describes it as a practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory. In his support, he quotes Michael Doyle: *'Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire'*. While Doyle's definition is flawed in view of contemporary imperialism whereby colonialism has ended [Israel is the last colonial state left], Said himself contradicts himself in the same breath when, having quoted Doyle, he asserts: *"In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism...lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practice"* (Said 1994:2). Similarly, Tomlinson (1991:19), describes imperialism as *"a specific form of domination...associated with 'empire'"*.

However, if imperialism is lingering on, how come colonialism has ended? Said does not explain. Likewise, the USA is an imperial country but has no formal empire. And if domination, as Tomlinson points out, is the defining characteristic, one can not differentiate between national oppression and imperial exploitation.

Also, historical experiences do not fit into this characterization. For instance, imperial exploitation of Latin America in the 19th century by England even when Latin American countries had attained formal political liberation is a case in point. One also wonders if empire and imperialism are concomitant, should Roman, Mongol, Islamic, and Ottoman empires also qualify as imperialisms?

Such problems remain unsolved in non-Marxist definitions of imperialism. Such definitions, even when coined by brilliant theoreticians like Edward Said, remain stuck in the apparent characteristics attributed to imperialism. Hence, always contradictory.

Untangling imperialism:

This term was first used in Britain in the early 19th century in relation to hostile French ambitions and gained greater currency after 1850, but it was the emergence of anti-imperialism at the end-of

19th century that strengthened the negative connotations of the term (Bush 2006:2) especially when Marxist theoreticians, in particular Lenin, linked it to Western capitalist exploitation of the rest and an inter-imperial rivalry endangering the world peace.

The 'basic economic dimension that is common to the various Marxist definitions of "imperialism" is as a mode of capitalist exploitation of the rest of the world, beyond the purely political-military concept of "empire" that goes back to the dawn of civilisation' (Achcar 2010).

In short: empire [formal, or informal] + capitalist exploitation= imperialism [1].

However, for classical Marxists [Lenin, Luxemburg, Hilferding, Bukharin, Kautsky etc---Marx himself did not propound any theory of imperialism [2].], imperialism meant "*primarily, rivalry between major capitalist countries, rivalry expressed in conflict over territory, taking political and military as well as economic forms, and leading ultimately to inter-imperialist war*" (Brewer 1990:89) in addition to assigning "*a central role to the evolution of the economic system*" all agreed that '*imperialism must be explained in terms of the development of capitalism*' (Ibid:11).

The *dominance* of stronger countries over weaker nations was certainly implicit even in the classical conceptions. But the focus at the turn of twentieth century was on the struggle for dominance among the imperial powers.

As conjunctural analysis, emphasis on inter-imperial rivalry proved intuitive since the inter-imperial rivalry led to two world wars. However, after the World War period, imperialism emerged with new characteristics. Delineated by the United States, imperialism after the World War II no more possessed colonies. And it did not have any imperial rivals. However, a unique situation emerged whereby the USSR, as capitalism's nemesis, became a rival. The world order bifurcated into a bipolar system. While the USSR at the head of post-capitalist COMECON countries constituted one pole, the USA emerged as the undisputed leader of the other pole.

Achcar identifies two combined reasons that projected the USA as what he calls suzerain of the Western imperialist system: '*First, the huge post-1945 disparity in power between a US which emerged from the war much stronger than it entered and its Western partners devastated by the same war. Secondly, the decisive rise of the counter-systemic power of the Soviet Union, which extended the zone under its control (its "buffer zone") to Central Europe thanks to the war*' (Achcar 2010).

With the disintegration of the USSR, however, the world system became unipolar. From a multipolarity to the unipolar moment by way of a bipolar interregnum, imperialism has proved a recurrent phenomenon "*understood as a set of coercive power relations established between different parts of the world economy, such that metropolitan benefitted at the expense of periphery*", involving the use of force [colonialism] as well as indirect control [post-colonial period]. However, "*the central mechanisms of imperialism were economic and involved the ability of the dominant capitalist powers to manipulate market imperatives to their advantage*" (Bromley 2004:150). Hence, in offering a renewed conceptualization of imperialism, this essay takes into account:

In the first, the US position as global suzerain in imperialism's present phase whereby the 'feudal paradigm of suzerain/vassals is the one that best fits the relations within the Western world-system between the US and its allies' (Achcar 2010). Suzerainty refers to the domination of one state by another whereby the dominant state acts as an overlord.

In the second, the centrality of core countries in the imperialist system. While the theory of imperialism remains "*a way of understanding capitalism in its heartlands - what is sometimes called*

the core of the 'world' system" (Callinicos 2009:16), imperialism remains a theoretical paradigm vis-à-vis capitalist exploitation of the rest of the world by the West.

Thirdly, the process of globalization means a qualitatively new phase in the internationalization of capitalism (Went 2000:43) whereby the *'underlying character of globalization is similar to that of imperialism. Both are narratives of domination and exploitation'* (Boyd-Barret 2009).

Dependency Theory:

The notion of dependency gained currency in the 1950s and the 1960s. Honed in the context of classical Marxist theories of imperialism, dependency perspective emerged as a radical critique of mainstream development theory.

The dependency theories see the world capitalist system as divided into a centre and a periphery (terminology varies; metropolitan and satellite, or core and periphery, are the alternatives). Andre Gunder Frank's book *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967) and *Deependencia y dessarrollo en America Latina* (1969), co-authored by Fernando H Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, are credited as inventors of dependency theory (Love 1990:143).

Frank, grounding his theory in Paul Baran's analysis of the global political economy, claimed that *"it is capitalism, both world and national, which produced underdevelopment in the present"* (in Brewer 1990:161).

This is because, Baran pointed out earlier in 1957, capitalism as it concretely arises in the periphery is of a special, truncated form, which inhibits the development of complete capitalism rather than promoting it: *'Far from serving as an engine of economic expansion, of technological progress, and of social change, the capitalist order in these countries has represented a framework for economic stagnation, for archaic technology, and for social backwardness'* (Baran 1973: 300). Thus, the normal processes of the global economic system cause the gap between the centre and the periphery, while the periphery is reduced to a state of dependence (Brewer1990: 161).

While the conditions for the form of development that entrenches poverty are international, it is not just that there is one group of countries in the world which happens to be developed and another that happens to be poor. *'The two are organically linked; that is to say, one part is poor because the other is rich. The relationship is partly historical – for colonialism and the slave trade helped to build up capitalism, and this provided the conditions for later forms of dependency – but the link between development and underdevelopment is also a process that continues today'* (Biel 2000:78). As Amin points out, the tendency to pauperization – the acute poverty that is both the basis for and product of capital accumulation, and thus of 'growth'-was transplanted to the periphery (Amin 1978).

But it is simplistic to see dependency as an international relationship, for it also requires a base in the social relations within the Southern countries. Specifically, it is internalized in the form of incomplete capitalism. The critique of development theory by Paul Baran makes this clear. The problem is not the absence of development but its presence since, the *"key proposition is that capitalism in the periphery arose in a special form"* whereby, to quote Baran, *"all that happened was the age-old exploitation of the population of under-developed countries by their domestic overlords was freed of the mitigating constraints inherited from the feudal tradition. This superimposition of business mores over ancient oppression by landed gentries resulted in compounded exploitation, more outrageous corruption, and most glaring injustice"* (Baran 1958:76).

That is, in the traditional set-up, the tribute received by the ruling class was largely conditional upon the good functioning of the system they ruled. In the context of neo-colonial capitalism, by contrast,

they receive what amounts to a kind of tribute arising from the malfunctioning of the system (Biel 2000:78). The dependency perspective does not imply that the periphery cannot break this cycle. However, it points out that capitalism cannot flourish in the periphery and for the periphery to develop, it is necessary to overthrow the centre-periphery paradigm.

Farooq Sulehria

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* Farooq Sulehria is currently pursuing his media studies. Previously, he has worked with Stockholm-based Weekly Internationalen. In Pakistan, he has worked with The Nation, The Frontier Post, The News, and the Pakistan. He has MA in Mass Communication from the University of Punjab, Lahore. He also contributes for Znet and various left publications internationally.

Footnotes

[1] Capitalism is a system whereby the producer [worker] does not own the means of production [tools, land, factory, mines]. This aspect was missing in case of old empires. It does not mean old empires were any better. However, plunder in case of Roman, Islamic, Mongol etc empires involved tribute and so on. The tribute-paying people owned the means of production. Now a days, a multinational based in the USA can invest anywhere, exploit the workers anywhere and dominate an economy anywhere in the 'Third World'.

[2] Since capitalism had not hitherto arrived at its latest stage.