

BRICS [Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa] and the tendency to sub-imperialism

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Despite their anti-imperialist potential, BRICS states have promoted neo-liberal and imperialist practices that facilitate capital accumulation, resource extraction and expansion of their markets. But growing popular unrest against exploitation, ecological destruction and neoliberalism in the BRICS countries may lead to a different, anti-imperialist, course.

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The rise of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) bloc represents a potentially important geopolitical and economic force that, in early 2014, suffers a worsening schizophrenia, in terms of positioning within global political economy. The bloc's more radical proponents argue it has 'anti-imperialist' potential. But there are far greater dangers of BRICS playing a 'sub-imperialist' role in contributing to neoliberal regime maintenance (especially in Africa), or even an inter-imperialist role as Russia appears tempted in the Ukraine/Crimea theatre. But there is potential, as well, for popular forces to unite in a role more akin to solidaristic cross-border anti-imperialism, given the extreme contradictions and intensity of social unrest in each site.

The label of 'sub-imperialist' states that accompany and extend imperialism was originally invoked by Ruy Mauro Marini (1965) to describe the Brazilian dictatorship's role in the Western Hemisphere, and was then repeatedly applied during the 1970s when the Nixon Doctrine allowed Washington to outsource geopolitical policing responsibilities and accumulation opportunities to favoured regional allies, mostly pro-corporate authoritarian regimes.

Although some believe BRICS will have sufficient autonomy to become actively anti-imperialist (Desai 2013, Escobar 2013, Keet 2013, Martin 2013, Shubin 2013, Third World Network 2013), at the level of global governance this bloc has tended to reinforce not challenge prevailing power relations, except in exceptional cases such as in 2013 when Syria was threatened with bombing by Washington and in 2014 when Russia invaded Crimea after losing crucial influence in Ukraine.

Like other more isolated states in prior epochs of service to imperialism, the BRICS accumulation trajectory, global geopolitical-economic-environmental strategy, hegemony over hinterlands and internal dynamics of class formation together suggest a pattern deserving the phrase sub-imperialist (Bond and Garcia 2014).

IMPERIALISM, CAPITALIST CRISIS, SUPER-EXPLOITATION AND REGIONAL HEGEMONY

There are at least four core relations of sub-imperialism: to imperialism, to capitalist crisis tendencies, to super-exploitative processes and to regional hegemony.

First, to define sub-imperialism properly implies a coherent definition of the systemic processes of imperialism within which it operates. There are a variety of ways to understand imperialism, but the most durable – especially for Africa – appears to be the conception which Rosa Luxemburg (1968) set out in *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913, stressing the extra-economic coercion associated with exploitation between capitalist and non-capitalist spheres under conditions of capitalist crisis (in contrast to other accounts of the era which hinge more upon capital export, formal colonial relations and inter-imperial rivalries).

Second, as a result, capitalist crisis conditions become evident within the sub-imperial economies just as they are in the imperialist, even when accumulation is moving ahead at an apparently rapid clip. Overaccumulation of capital is a constant problem everywhere, often rising to crisis stage. As a result, in several sub-imperialist countries there are powerful impulses for local capital to both externalize and financialize.

Judging by David Harvey's (2003) criteria in which sub-imperialists seek 'spatio-temporal fixes' to these problems, the BRICS offer some of the most extreme sites in the world today. These crisis conditions are particularly important because in the contemporary period, they have shifted what had earlier been nationalist (or even 'state-capitalist') power relations imposed by patronage-oriented states, towards the neoliberal public policies practiced elsewhere. They also entail intensified uneven development combined with super-exploitative (and often extra-economically coercive) systems of accumulation, as well as economic symptoms of imperialist desperation, especially financialization.

Third, sub-imperial regimes expand these same neoliberal practices for use within their regional spheres of influence, thus legitimating the Washington Consensus in ideological and concrete terms, especially by facilitating multilateral trade, investment and financing arrangements. Indeed, sub-imperial powers often promote neoliberal institutions even when complaining (sometimes bitterly) about their indifference to poorer countries, and they sometimes establish new ones that have similar functions in regional terms.

This in turn often permits the sub-imperial power to act as a regional platform for accumulation, drawing resources from the hinterland and marketing exports that typically destroy hinterland productive capacity and economic sovereignty. Usually the benefits are manifold, including trade surpluses with the hinterland (where the latter often supplies crucial raw materials on advantageous terms), the opportunity for profits to be accumulated within the sub-imperial power's financial centres, and the expansion of influence via a strengthened economy especially where trade is conducted in the sub-imperial power's currency.

All of this logically entails a regional gendarme role, a division of policing labour that allows the world capitalist system to continue with expansion of contracts, their enforcement and the extraction of adequate flows of materials (as well as workers) from distant sites that remain critical to the smooth functioning of the world division of labour.

Fourth, as Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros (2011, 19) put it, imperialism's relations with sub-imperial allies always entailed 'the super-exploitation of domestic labour. It was natural, therefore, that, as it grew, it would require external markets for the resolution of its profit realisation crisis.' Concretely,

to take BRICS as an example, super-exploitative relations are witnessed in the way that Chinese households are torn from rural land during the ongoing urbanization process, and in the broader context in which rural people require special work permits to live in cities, where they are paid much lower wages.

Such super-exploitative relations are then readily transferred to the international scale, where China's role has been even more predatory than Western corporations, backed by its support to local dictators (e.g. the case of Zimbabwe where Chinese military and Zimbabwean generals conjoined as the Anjin Corporation in the world's largest diamond fields, with a resulting Resource Curse as extreme as any in contemporary Africa) (Maguwu 2013).

Likewise, South Africa's historical mode of apartheid super-exploitation - termed 'articulations of modes of production' by Harold Wolpe (1980) - exemplified the most extreme internal dimension of sub-imperial accumulation. Migrant male workers from rural Bantustans as well as regional hinterlands as far north as Malawi long provided 'cheap labour', thanks to black rural women's unpaid reproduction of children, sick workers and retirees generally without state support.

This was not merely a matter of formal racial power. The expansion of the South African migrancy model much deeper into the Southern African region in the wake of apartheid's early 1990s demise occurred notwithstanding tragic xenophobic reactions from the local working class. The August 2012 Marikana massacre of striking migrant platinum mineworkers at Lonmin was another example of how far the regimes' policing function would go internally so as to defend the profitability of multinational extractive corporations (Saul and Bond 2014). But it is the inexorable regional-hinterland expansion of these processes that compels sub-imperial states to follow the logic of imperialism.

This is recognized by professional geopoliticians of capital, such as the Texas intelligence firm Stratfor (2009), in an internal memo (as revealed by WikiLeaks): 'South Africa's history is driven by the interplay of competition and cohabitation between domestic and foreign interests exploiting the country's mineral resources. Despite being led by a democratically-elected government, the core imperatives of South Africa remain the maintenance of a liberal regime that permits the free flow of labor and capital to and from the southern Africa region, as well as the maintenance of a superior security capability able to project into south-central Africa.'

The ability to move up-continent was questioned in March 2013, however, in the Central African Republic capital of Bangui after authoritarian ruler Francois Bozize was ousted by guerrillas. More than a dozen South African soldiers were killed, according to interviews of surviving troops in Johannesburg's main Sunday newspaper, while 'protecting belongings of... businesses in Jo'burg... We were lied to straight out... We were told we were here to serve and protect, to ensure peace' (Hosken and Mahlangu 2013). The protected Johannesburg capitalists included firms linked to the ruling party (Amabhungane 2013).

DYNAMICS OF IMPERIALISM AND SUB-IMPERIALISM

These latter relationships, in which capitalism both exploits and corrodes non-capitalist relations through extra-economic coercive techniques, were theorised originally by Luxemburg and have been revitalised as an explanatory system by Harvey under the rubric of 'accumulation by dispossession.' In other words, there are theoretically derived processes which explain the logic of imperialism and sub-imperialism together, even if contingencies may change the geographical place, shape and scale at which these processes unfold.

Luxemburg's (1968, 396) *Accumulation of Capital* focuses on how capitalism's extra-economic coercive capacities loot mutual aid systems and commons facilities, families (especially women's role in social reproduction), the land, all forms of nature, and the shrinking state: 'The relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production start making their appearance on the international stage. Its predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system - a policy of spheres of interest - and war. Force, fraud, oppression, looting are openly displayed without any attempt at concealment, and it requires an effort to discover within this tangle of political violence and contests of power the stern laws of the economic process.'

Thanks to a very careful examination of colonial-extractivist conditions in the then South Africa, Namibia and the DRC (Bond, Chitonge and Hopfmann 2007), her core insight (1968, 397), as distinct from framings by Lenin, Bukharin, Hilferding, Hobson and others of her era, was to show that 'Capital cannot accumulate without the aid of non-capitalist' relations. 'Only the continuous and progressive disintegration of non-capitalist organization makes accumulation of capital possible.'

This process, Luxemburg argued, in which 'capital feeds on the ruins' of the non-capitalist relation, amounts to 'eating it up. Historically, the accumulation of capital is a kind of metabolism between capitalist economy and those pre-capitalist methods of production without which it cannot go on and which, in this light, it corrodes and assimilates.'

This process is amplified during periods of desperation intrinsic to capitalist crisis, Luxemburg (1968, 76) observed, drawing on Marx's classical theory about 'perpetual overproduction,' characterized by 'the ceaseless flow of capital from one branch of production to another, and finally in the periodical and cyclical swings of reproduction between overproduction and crisis.'

At that point, Luxemburg (1968, 327) insists, the core countries reveal 'the deep and fundamental antagonism between the capacity to consume and the capacity to produce in a capitalist society, a conflict resulting from the very accumulation of capital which periodically bursts out in crises and spurs capital on to a continual extension of the market.' The current renewal of this process - crisis, extension of the market, and amplified capitalist-noncapitalist super-exploitative relations - serves as the basis for renewed imperialism.

But Harvey (2003) adds a new layer to this argument: 'The opening up of global markets in both commodities and capital created openings for other states to insert themselves into the global economy, first as absorbers but then as producers of surplus capitals. They then became competitors on the world stage. What might be called 'sub-imperialisms' arose... Each developing centre of capital accumulation sought out systematic spatio-temporal fixes for its own surplus capital by defining territorial spheres of influence.'

Harvey (1992) identifies 'a cascading and proliferating series of spatio-temporal fixes' to persistent economic crisis, which are invoked so as to extend capitalism geographically and across time, usually facilitated by dramatic financial expansion. The role of banks in core and even sub-imperial countries is to indebt poorer countries so that they can be wedged open for the sake of liberalised trade and investment or simple resource extraction. Expansion of the credit system is also the traditional way to address overproduction of goods, as debt allows these to be mopped up in the present with a promise to extract further surpluses to pay the price in future.

According to Harvey (2003, 134), these fixes do not result in crisis resolution, but instead, lead to new contradictions associated with uneven development: 'increasingly fierce international competition as multiple dynamic centers of capital accumulation emerge to compete on the world stage in the face of strong currents of overaccumulation. Since they cannot all succeed in the long run, either the weakest succumb and fall into serious crises of devaluation, or geopolitical

confrontations erupt in the form of trade wars, currency wars and even military confrontations.'

The territorially-rooted power blocs generated by internal alliances (and conflicts) within national boundaries, or occasionally across boundaries to regional scale, are the critical units of analysis when it comes to fending off the devalorization of overaccumulated capital. By uncovering these units, it is feasible to root a durable geopolitical theory appropriate for understanding contemporary imperialism. The BRICS reflect this new relationship, for as Brazilian president Lula announced in 2010, 'A new global economic geography is born.' However, relying upon financiers such as leading Goldman Sachs executive Jim O'Neill (originator of the 'BRIC' meme in 2001) to codify economic power is risky.

What appeared as a strong bloc of BRICS countries at a leadership summit in March 2013 became, within four months, the core of the 'Fragile Five' countries, leaving O'Neill to remark that only China deserved the 'building-block' BRICS designation (Magalhaes 2013). India, South Africa and Brazil lost vast amounts of their currency values and funding flows once financial capital left these markets in search of the dollar safe-haven once the US Federal Reserve's loose monetary policy - 'Quantitative Easing' - began to be 'tapered'. The same experience of massive capital outflow hit Russia in early 2014, first because of the loss of regional power signified by Ukraine's government overthrow, and then when Moscow began a blunt takeover of Crimea, Western sanctions threats crashed its stock market.

So notwithstanding the validity of the general approach Luxemburg proposed, in which ongoing capital accumulation entails imperialism reaching into the terrain of extra-economic coercion, this is not a stable outcome. Each situation must be evaluated on its own concrete terms. Dating at least a half-century to when the idea of sub-imperialism was introduced, in Brazil, the concrete settings are vital because contingencies arise that may divert from the twin logics of capital and expanding territorial power relations.

CONCRETE SUB-IMPERIAL LOCATIONS

The new concentrations of southern power began to be evident by the 1960s when new alliances strengthened in the Cold War context. In his pioneering writing about Latin American geopolitics dating to the 1960s, Marini (1974) argued that 1970s-era Brazil was 'the best current manifestation of sub-imperialism,' because of regional economic extraction, export of capital typically associated with imperialist politics, and internal corporate monopolization, including financialization.

There are three additional roles for these regimes, today, if they are to be considered sub-imperialist. One is ensuring regional geopolitical 'stability' in areas suffering severe tensions: for example, Brasilia's army in Haiti and Pretoria's deal-making in African hotspots like South Sudan, the Great Lakes and the Central African Republic. The Israeli and Saudi Arabian roles in the Middle East are comparable, and white-ruled South Africa was, likewise, a Western sub-imperial outpost during the Cold War, what with liberation struggles raging in surrounding countries during the 1960s-80s. Extra-economic coercion in support of raw material extraction is a common feature of this power, when in many cases the role of regional gendarme is not just 'peace-keeping' but transferring surpluses from the hinterland to the sub-imperialist capital city, and often from then to the imperialist headquarters, as is especially evident for contemporary South Africa (Bond 2006a, Bond 2006b).

The second is advancing the broader agenda of globalized neoliberalism, so as to legitimate deepened market access. This occurs insofar as most sub-imperial powers are enthusiastic financial backers of the main vehicles for global economic governance, especially the Bretton Woods

Institutions and World Trade Organisation. For rhetorical purposes the sub-imperial powers' foreign, trade and even finance ministries may be less than flattering about global governance, and in the case of the BRICS in 2013-14, may even launch new multilateral initiatives with the stated aim of challenging power. But standing by the IMF even in times of crisis - e.g. the institution's recapitalization in 2009 and 2012 occurred with notable BRICS support (\$75 billion in coordinated aid in the latter case) - reflects the overall role that sub-imperial regimes play: to lubricate, legitimize and extend neoliberal political economy deeper into their regional hinterlands.

The same has been true in the single most important long-term global governance challenge, climate management, where the BRICS (without Russia) lined up as critical allies within Washington's 'Copenhagen Accord' strategy in 2009, both avoiding emissions cuts and promoting the further financialization of the climate strategy through extended carbon trading (Bond 2012; Böhm, Misoczky and Moog 2012). (Later, Russia cemented this function by raising its own greenhouse gas emissions dramatically and then reneging on Kyoto Protocol commitments and withdrawing from the main climate treaty.) This role of propping up global economic and environmental malgovernance often benefits home-based corporations in the sub-imperial countries, but it is also a marker of cooperation and collaboration with the imperialist projects of core countries' multinational corporations and states.

Another example of where this was not only helpful but necessary was the World Trade Organisation, which in earlier manifestation several BRICS countries had sought to revitalize as early as the 2005 Hong Kong ministerial summit. Free-trade corporate expansion and ongoing self-interested protectionism prevail in an often uneasy mix in sub-imperial economies, but BRICS counterhegemonic activity in the WTO has occurred well within the broader agenda of neoliberalism. According to one of the coordinators of the Our World is Not for Sale civil society network (James 2013), the mid-2013 promotion of the Brazilian ambassador to the WTO - Roberto Azevêdo - to become the body's director-general was debilitating for resistance by the South's 'G-110' bloc.

The 2013 cancellation of Europe-South African Bilateral Investment Treaties by SA trade minister Rob Davies was considered to be an inspiring case of standing up to the West, but as an exception which proved the rule, and it also confirmed Pretoria's defence of regional domination against EU intrusion into its immediate hinterland, the Southern African Customs Union. For at the end of the day, in December 2013, Azevêdo was able to arrange a WTO ministerial agreement that put the organization back on track - a notable accomplishment given the failure of his predecessor, Pascal Lamy who hailed from (and invariably supported) the European Union during prior failed efforts.

In this context, what may emerge from the networking of the sub-imperialist elites, as witnessed in the BRICS bloc in its initial formation period, 2008-14, is an agenda that more systematically confirms super-exploitative practices within their hinterlands.

Just as the political carving of Africa in Berlin at the 1884-85 conference hosted by Bismarck drew boundaries mainly benefiting extractive enterprises - mining houses and plantations as well as construction firms associated with capital accumulation in England, France, Portugal, Belgium and Germany - BRICS appears to follow colonial and neo-colonial tracks. Identifying port, bridge, road, hydropower and other infrastructure projects in the same image, the BRICS 2013 Durban summit had as its aim the continent's economic carve-up, unburdened - now as then - by what would be derided as 'Western' concerns about democracy and human rights, with more than a dozen African heads of state present as collaborators. The New Partnership for Economic Development and African Peer Review Mechanism were often alleged to serve as African home-grown policing mechanisms for such infrastructure, but were generally ineffective (Bond 2005, 2009).

However, it is also critical to concede that the forms of BRICS sub-imperialism are diverse, for as Moyo and Yeros (2011,19) remark, 'Some are driven by private blocs of capital with strong state support (Brazil, India); others, like China, include the direct participation of state-owned enterprises; while in the case of South Africa, it is increasingly difficult to speak of an autonomous domestic bourgeoisie, given the extreme degree of de-nationalisation of its economy in the post-apartheid period. The degree of participation in the Western military project is also different from one case to the next although, one might say, there is a schizophrenia to all this, typical of sub-imperialism.'

The recent period has reignited a fruitful debate about the concept of sub-imperialism and about transitions from sub- to inter-imperialism, and perhaps also one day to anti-imperialism. However, the most critical factor in making this debate real, not just a struggle over semantics between impotent leftist intellectuals, is a different process entirely, one not contingent upon rhetoric from above, but upon reality from below. Reality from below is increasingly tense in each of the main sub-imperialist powers currently seeking unity, the BRICS.

In each, a series of class, social, ecological and political battles has begun to unfold, sparked by unusual events that to the surprise of most commentators, took on national importance: public transport price increases and excesses associated with World Cup hosting in mid-2013 (Brazil); a democracy movement in late 2011, freedom of expression battle involving a risque rock band in 2012, gay rights in 2013 and anti-war protest in 2014 (Russia); a high-profile rape-murder in late 2012 and municipal electoral surprise by a left-populist political party in late 2013 (India); an ongoing wave of rural anti-displacement, local-ecology, anti-corruption and labour protests that number more than 200,000 annually (China); and a massacre of mineworkers in mid-2012 amidst a general uprising of poor people against lack of access - or overpricing - of municipal services (South Africa).

All such struggles are impulsive and impossible to predict, but much deeper class struggles against super-exploitation, ecological destruction and neoliberalism are unfolding constantly in each site. The challenge for 'brics-from-below' critics is to link and internationalise as quickly as possible, because their interests and campaigning analyses, strategies, tactics and alliances have many points of overlap - with each other and with the world's progressive forces. Only then will a genuine global anti-imperialist project become possible, i.e., when anti-sub-imperialists of the world also unite.

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