

Imperialism Transformed

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WHAT FOLLOWS IS an edited version of a talk given on August 20 as the first of four online lectures held by the Amsterdam-based International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) on “the changing shapes of imperialism” after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. [All four talks can be streamed online.](#)

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SINCE FEBRUARY 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine, imperialism looks different. Not for the first time — since its origin in the late 19th century, imperialism has changed its shape in major ways several times.

Big shifts occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War and again with the rise of neoliberal globalization in the 1980s, culminating in the “hyperglobalization” that lasted from about 1995 to 2008. Each time, features of imperialism that Marxists had considered central were thrown into question. Now this is happening again.

Each phase of imperialism has given rise to crucial political debates and divisions on the left: over “defensism” versus “defeatism” during the First World War, and again during the Second World War; over attitudes toward wars of national liberation during the Cold War; over a proposed reconceptualization of imperialism as “Empire” in the period of neoliberal globalization.

Today, with the war in Ukraine, there are debates about sanctions against Russia, sending arms to Ukraine, and attitudes toward NATO expansion (now and in retrospect). Potentially similar issues are looming around the conflict between China and Taiwan.

I won’t try to address all these issues in this introductory lecture. I will leave most of the specific questions around Russia and China to the other three lectures: by Pierre Rousset on the rise of China, by Hanna Perekhoda and Catherine Samary on Ukraine, and by Ilya Matveev on Russia. (Though I can’t resist saying a thing or two on those issues myself).

My focus today will be on the overall theoretical and historical basics. Looking at each of the previous phases of imperialism, I’ll put forward some propositions about which features of those earlier phases still apply today and which don’t. Also, since the other three lectures won’t focus on the United States and the European Union, this one will devote particular attention to U.S. and European imperialisms — which have definitely not gone away!

Key Points

To be upfront about what I'm arguing, let me lay out some key points.

First, what do Marxists mean by imperialism? War and conquest far predate 19th-century colonial empires, or the Cold War, or neoliberal globalization. The first wave of European global expansion, launched by 15th-century Portugal and 16th-century Spain, even predated capitalism. The British conquest of India and the French conquest of Algeria, though carried out by capitalist states, still did not fit many of the key features of imperialism later theorized by Marxists.

To be very schematic: beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, European and later U.S. and Japanese global expansion, as several Marxists analyzed it, was characterized by a deeper penetration of capitalist relations into production, trade and investment in the conquered regions, and a more direct domination by capitalist companies based in the dominant countries: "cartels" and "trusts" in Lenin's time, multinational corporations and banks today.

These have been the key abiding features of the imperialist order, even as it has mutated radically several times over the past century and a half. So what is specific about imperialism today? By comparison with the Cold War years or the period of hyperglobalization, this is a time of heightened instability, recurrent crises, and geopolitical turmoil. Yet more than in the Cold War years — when capitalist and non-capitalist great powers faced off — imperialism is today a truly global order.

Aside from a few isolated states like Cuba and North Korea, every country is now essentially capitalist. And global capitalism can and must be analyzed as a whole. The United States, European Union, Japan, China and Russia are conflicting but still integral parts of this whole.

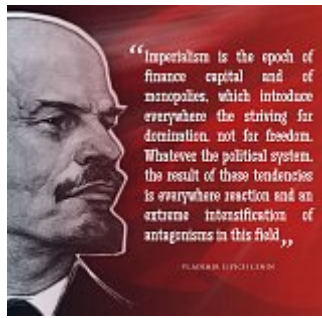
This analysis is a theoretical basis for a political position: an anti-campist politics, meaning a politics that opposes all campisms. Within this imperialist global order, there is no major "anti-imperialist" power, that is, no major power that resists the overall dynamic of globalized capitalism.

This means that we should acknowledge the reality of Russian and Chinese imperialisms and intransigently oppose them, without seeing them as lesser evils, since ultimately they are part of the same global evil.

At the same time, we must remain intransigently opposed to U.S., European and Japanese imperialism, refusing to see them as lesser evils — even regionally or locally, for example in Ukraine. In other words, our analysis needs to lay the basis for a revolutionary politics independent of all imperialisms.

Relevance of Lenin's Analysis

To start with, let me go back to basics. For me this means going back to Lenin. Although Luxemburg, Bukharin, Hilferding and others made important contributions over a century ago to a Marxist understanding of imperialism, I want to stress several key insights of Lenin's that I think are still valid today.



First, Lenin (like other Marxists in his time) understood imperialism as a fundamentally economic reality. Formal colonialism and militarism were subordinated in his analysis to that economic reality.

Second — a point often neglected — Lenin understood the heterogeneity of different imperialisms. For example, in Lenin's time tsarist imperialism was economically weak, and thus especially dependent on military power to safeguard the economic dominance of Russian capital across the tsarist empire.

British, German and U.S. capitals were all economically strong enough to exercise power beyond the bounds of the states they dominated; that was much less true of Russian capital. It is also less true today of Putin's Russia.

As for China, despite the strength and dynamism of its economy, its imperialism involves an exceptionally strong role for the state and ruling party. Paradoxically, Chinese capitalism owes much of its resilience to the anti-capitalist revolution that forged that state and ruling party.

The European Union is at the opposite end of the imperialist spectrum from Russia: its economic strength is out of proportion to its military means. This means that the EU can adopt an apparently pacific stance in Ukraine without diminishing its economic power over Ukraine.

Yet as the saying goes, the EU is a giant with feet of clay. Militarily, the EU is still very much dependent on U.S. capabilities — aircraft carriers, for instance — to project military power to other parts of the world, or even to some extent within Europe. So while Europe exercises imperial economic power beyond the EU's borders, it is dependent on the United States to sustain that power militarily.

The key point here is that while Lenin in his time understood the differences between the United States and tsarist Russia, he characterized them both as imperialist. We should do the same today with all the different imperialist powers.

Third, Lenin distinguished between established imperialisms, which concentrated on defending the status quo, and rising, more aggressive imperialisms like Germany. Yet during the First World War, he refused to view more established powers like Britain and France as less imperialist — essentially the same position that Trotsky adopted regarding the Second World War.

Fourth, Lenin saw the main dividing line in the world as the one between all the imperialist powers, on the one hand, and the countries and regions dominated by imperialism, on the other.

He saw this as a structural divide, based on ongoing relationships of economic subordination: imperial powers' dominant market and financial positions, their privileged access to raw materials, and so on. And this was mainly an economic divide, not a juridical one. That is, formally independent countries like China, Persia and Mexico, which Lenin called "semi-colonies," were still dominated by imperialism.

This analysis applies today to Ukraine. Ukraine is defending its national sovereignty in the current war. Yet its 2015 association agreement with the EU, which ended a period in which Ukraine balanced between Russia and the EU, has forced it to open its market to EU exports and investments.

The agreement also obligated Ukraine to adopt a range of EU rules which, as a non-member state, it had no say in drafting. This makes it essentially a semi-colony of the EU. In defending its independence, it is also defending the EU's economic sphere of influence.

The structural divide between imperialist and dominated countries is also manifest today in the global impact of the Ukraine war. The war is causing suffering in many countries. Europeans for example, especially working and poor Europeans, will suffer badly from rising energy prices this winter. But the consequences for dependent countries are far more devastating.

For many decades, domestic food production was decimated in many dependent countries by neoliberal globalization, especially in the EU's African, Caribbean and Pacific "backyard" where Europe established itself as a huge agricultural exporter. Today dependent countries' peoples can no longer afford food in a world deprived of Ukrainian grain. People will starve, at a time when global warming — yet another consequence of a terribly unequal global economy — was already devastating agriculture in many countries of the global South.

Resistance is Progressive

One last point about Lenin's analysis — a key political point — Lenin believed that whenever independent resistance to imperialist domination arose in a dominated country, that resistance was progressive and worthy of support. On this point he disagreed with Rosa Luxemburg's argument that in the era of imperialism only a revolutionary socialist movement could be genuinely independent of all imperialisms.

This was at stake in Lenin's debate with Luxemburg over the 1916 Irish Easter rising. Lenin supported the Irish rebels against British imperialism, and would have supported them even if they had taken weapons from Germany, because he saw that their rebellion was independent in practice from outside direction by any imperialist power.

There was no comparison between the situation of the Irish rebels in 1916 and the situation of the Serbian and Belgian governments, almost all of whose territory had been quickly occupied by Germany and Austria-Hungary and whose decisions were therefore overwhelmingly subordinated to British and French military commands.

This same logic underlies Marxists' support today for Ukraine in its fight against Russian imperialism, despite its getting arms from NATO countries. For all his political shortcomings, Zelensky today has a freedom of maneuver that rules out seeing him as a simple NATO stooge.

For that matter, while Zelensky is in the last analysis a rightwing neoliberal — juggling imperialist interests with the interests of Ukrainian oligarchs, particularly the one whose media empire created him — he is still not a creature of the reactionary far right, despite some leftists' inflated portrayals of fascist power in Ukraine.

In this sense, we can be far less ambivalent about Ukrainian battlefield victories than about say, the Taliban's victory over imperialism in Afghanistan. Defeating the Taliban with a puppet Afghan government and army was always hopeless. The Ukrainian resistance is by no means hopeless in that sense, because the Ukrainian government is not that kind of puppet regime.

NATO Without Illusions

Moving on to later phases of imperialism — the Cold War and the period of neoliberal globalization — allows us to appreciate some other important political points.

After 1945, one central feature of imperialism as Lenin had analyzed it no longer held true. Lenin had believed that conflicting interests between different capitals would inevitably lead to wars between imperialist states. Between 1945 and 1991, this didn't happen. There weren't inter-imperialist wars remotely comparable to the First or Second World Wars.

In fact, inter-imperialist economic rivalry remained a constant and growing reality of the Cold War period. What was new was the U.S. role as a military guarantor of the imperialist order as a whole, faced with non-capitalist great powers like the USSR and China and with anti-colonial revolutions in countries like Vietnam and Cuba that became anti-capitalist revolutions.

As one dimension of its global military role, the United States was among other things the central power in NATO. NATO was a "defensive" alliance only in the sense that it was defending the imperialist order. The U.S. commitment to defend Western Europe was part and parcel of the its defense of capitalism worldwide, even while Washington's commitment to defending European colonial empires was combined with a push to pry open those empires for a more level capitalist playing field.

The central U.S. military role has outlived the Cold War, and in fact outlived the major challenges to capitalism as such. Still today in 2022, United States military spending is 38% of the world total. And NATO today is still one of the U.S. global military instruments.

The Soviet military threat to Western Europe was much greater in the late 1940s than the Russian threat to the EU countries is today. After all, Soviet troops were present in Berlin, Prague and Vienna, while U.S. troops that had marched into Western Europe were rapidly demobilized under popular pressure after 1945.

Despite the devastation of the USSR during the war, Soviet conventional military superiority was overwhelming afterwards. The U.S. nuclear monopoly (which ended in 1949) was seen as vital to stopping a Soviet advance in a new war, and French and Italian Communists were seen as powerful fifth columns. Putin with his connections to European far-rightists has nothing comparable today.

Marxist opposition to NATO's founding in 1949, even among anti-Stalinist Marxists, depended on understanding the global character of the imperialist order. This is still true today — in fact, far more true today, now that NATO has gone "out of area" in order to avoid going "out of business."

NATO's role in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2022 had no parallel in a NATO role in Algeria or Vietnam during the Cold War. This should make it easier to oppose NATO today — when, for example, Sweden's joining NATO has such direct consequences for the oppression of Kurds in Turkey. (The Erdogan regime is demanding the extradition of Kurdish activists from Sweden — ed.)

One more continuity with the Cold War should be noted: the economic dividend that the U.S. military role yields for U.S. capital. This was manifest during the Cold War, for example in 1985 when Reagan prevailed on Europe to prop up U.S. trade by allowing the dollar to depreciate, in an implicit quid pro quo for the U.S. defense of Europe.

It was still apparent after the Cold War, when U.S. and British multinationals like Shell and BP benefitted from Saddam Hussein's defeat at the expense of French and Chinese oil companies,

whose states hadn't backed the U.S. war effort. Still today, U.S. companies benefit from advantages in Eastern Europe that they wouldn't have without Washington's military role in the region.

Globalization and its Changes

In short: we do, and do not, still live in the imperialist world that Lenin described. We do, and do not, live in the world of the Cold War.

Are we still living in the period of neoliberal globalization? To answer this question, we need to distinguish the neoliberal globalization that began with Thatcher, Reagan and the 1982 debt crisis from the later period of "hyperglobalization" (to use the term coined by economist Dani Rodrik).

Following Saigon's fall in 1975 and the liberation of Managua in the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, neoliberalism restored the global hegemony of trilateral capital (U.S./EU/Japan).

Partly this was due to the "normal" operation of real international capitalist competition, which usually tends to worsen global inequality by favoring rich countries and regions over poor ones (as Charlie Post explains in a forthcoming article in *Spectre*). Partly also (in Claudio Katz' analysis) it was due to a new set of mechanisms of value transfer: forced indebtedness, structural adjustment policies including forcing markets open, increased repatriation of multinational profits, reining in the prerogatives of dependent states, etc.

However exactly it happened, neoliberal globalization largely reversed the relative gains made by dependent countries during the Cold War, largely due to the geopolitical and policy space opened up by U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

Neoliberalism reaffirmed the imperialist character of the world order. This is contrary to Thomas Friedman's thesis that "the world is flat," meaning that national power made far less economic difference in a globalized world — and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's thesis that we were all living in a less differentiated "Empire" with no dominating center.

The fantasies of the 1990s about Brazil or South Africa overtaking the United States and Europe have been exploded. Even India, with its over a billion people, still has a GDP (in nominal terms) smaller than Germany's, with its 80-some million. The world is not flat; it is steeply hierarchical.

Moreover, despite all the economic tensions and ruptures of the past few years and months, Russia and China are still integrated into the capitalist world economy. Even if the United States, the EU and Japan do much more to reduce strategic dependence on Russia and China — as they probably will — their threatened "decoupling" still has a long way to go.

Russia for example still has an export-oriented extractivist economy. Even if Chinese capital has emerged as a serious competitor to other capitals in Africa and Latin America, it is still competing on terms that were largely dictated by Western capital in the 1990s. In this sense, we still live in a neoliberal world.

But something crucial has changed. The pre-2008 period of virtually complete worldwide political domination by multinational capital has ended. And the period of Russian and Chinese acquiescence in a Western-designed order is over. Inter-imperialist conflicts are intensifying.

It's important to see that this is true across the board, on every side of the deepening international dividing lines. Vladimir Putin is not Boris Yeltsin, Xi Jinping is not Deng Xiaoping — and at the same time, Trump and even Biden are not George H.W. Bush.

Biden has not restored the World Trade Organization appellate panels (which can't function since Trump refused to appoint new judges — ed.), has not rolled back sanctions on China, has not joined the International Criminal Court. There has been a lasting recomposition in the main imperialist states of what Nicos Poulantzas called the “power bloc”: the relationship of forces at state level between different fractions of capital.

In this changed situation, the rivalries between the imperialist blocs are complex and constantly shifting. Viewed from one angle, for example, Putin's invasion of Ukraine did U.S. imperialism a big favor. It restored U.S. prestige at a time when the Afghan defeat had badly dented it. It pushed the United States and EU into each other's arms when Trump had badly strained US-European ties, and suddenly made raising NATO military budgets much easier (unfortunately).

But earlier tensions between the blocs have given way to new ones. Europe today is divided between countries like the UK and Poland, which tend to follow the aggressive U.S. line, and countries like France and Germany, which remain less inclined to burn all their bridges with Russia. The repercussions of this war will continue to be wide-ranging and unpredictable.

In any event there is a nationalist shift, reflected in but not limited to the rise of the far right. It is reflected in the rise of racism and xenophobia worldwide. And there is a vicious cycle of conflict between “femonationalism” — to use Sara Farris' term for the instrumentalization of women's rights by imperialist governments and the right — and more traditional patriarchal ideology.

The same vicious cycle of conflict exists between “homonationalism” (to use Jasbir Puar's term for the similar instrumentalization of LGBTI rights) and what I call heteronationalism: the instrumentalization of anti-LGBTI ideology by more or less “anti-Western” regimes (e.g. Putin, Orban).

This too is a dimension of the dividing lines being drawn today in the world. Yet it is in many ways an ideological smokescreen, on both sides, in what is still a unified imperialist order.

Self-Determination

I will mostly leave it to the other three lectures to draw out the specific implications of all this for the current conflicts on the Eurasian land mass. But I will close with one overarching political point.

Today as in Lenin's time, Marxists need to be champions of self-determination. At the same time, today as a century ago, our defense of self-determination needs to be informed by an understanding that no imperialist power can be counted on as an ally.

In Ukraine today, it is understandable and justified for Ukrainians to want weapons from NATO to defend themselves. But as Gilbert Achcar has pointed out, U.S. and British schemes to use Ukraine to punish and constrain Russia are both dangerous — given the mind-boggling risks of nuclear war — and futile, because ultimately a complete Ukrainian military victory over Russia is impossible as long as the Putin regime remains unshaken.

Ultimately, the only hope for full Ukrainian national liberation lies in international solidarity with the Russian opposition. This means that the stupid nationalism (in this specific case) of anti-Russian cultural and sports boycotts are the last thing the Ukrainians need.

So are sanctions that hurt Russian working people, while leaving oligarchs and energy multinationals rolling in ill-gotten excess profits. History has demonstrated time and again that measures that make civilians suffer are effective only in lining them up behind their countries'

governments.

This means that today as a century ago, a politics of national liberation must be an across-the-board anti-imperialist politics: a politics of revolutionary internationalism.

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P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 221, November/December 2022:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc221/imperialism-transformed/>