

Imperialist expropriation, global care chains and shifting core-periphery boundaries: An interview with Nancy Fraser

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Nancy Fraser is the Henry and Louise A. Loeb Professor of Philosophy and Politics at the New School for Social Research in New York, working on social, political and feminist theory. She is also the author of, among other works, [*Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—and What We Can Do About It*](#). In this extensive interview, Fraser talks with Federico Fuentes for *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal* about how transfers of natural wealth and care fit within modern imperialism, the role expropriation continues to play in capital accumulation, and the increasingly blurred nature of core-periphery boundaries under financialised capitalism.

Federico Fuentes: Over the past century, the term imperialism has been used to define different situations and, at times, been replaced by concepts such as globalisation and hegemony. Does the concept of imperialism remain valid and, if so, how do you define it?

Nancy Fraser: The term imperialism remains essential and I oppose replacing it with the other concepts. Globalisation, for example, is a buzzword. If by globalisation we simply mean the end of national economies and industrial policies, and the rise of neoliberalisation and elite capitalist powers shifting to a so-called free trade agenda, then that is fine. But imperialism refers to something else. Hegemony is an important concept in geopolitics. Generally speaking, it refers to the role an imperialist power (or bloc of powers) plays in organising the global space to facilitate imperialist extraction. But this refers to the political organisation of the global space. Again, this is different from imperialism — the concepts of hegemony and imperialism go together, but they are not the same. It is also trendy nowadays to hear talk of coloniality and decoloniality. This language seeks to underline how, even with the end of direct colonial rule, colonial hierarchies of cultural value remain in place. On its own, this idea is fine. But when it is used to replace the concept of imperialism — as it often is — it ends up putting the issue of global or imperial capitalism on the backburner. Yet that is where we need to start.

So, I am strongly in favour of retaining the term imperialism, even though I think we have to understand it better. Imperialism, in strictly economic terms, is about the transfer or extraction of value by certain powers from certain regions that are treated as hinterlands. But we can no longer just talk about extraction of economic value in the form of mineral wealth or surplus value. We also have to talk about extraction of ecological wealth and capacities for care from the periphery to capitalist core countries.

Discussions on the left regarding imperialism often refer to Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin's [book](#) on the subject. How much of his book remains relevant today and what elements, if any, have been superseded by subsequent developments?

Lenin's analysis of imperialism was an extremely powerful intervention at the time. But the concept of imperialism has been enriched since then. I also see some issues with his original concept.

Lenin specifically associated imperialism with financialisation. We are certainly living in a time of tremendous financialisation. But I would not say financialisation *per se* defines imperialism. Imperialism is about the transfers of both capitalised forms of wealth and what we could define as not yet fully capitalised forms of value, such as nature and care. Lenin also believed imperialism represented the last stage of capitalism. "Last stage" evokes [Rosa Luxemburg](#)'s idea that, at some point, capitalism will encompass everything and there will no longer be anything outside it. At that point, capitalism will no longer be able to expand and will cease to exist. Yet imperialism today involves both the incorporation of new forms of societal value into capitalist circuits of reproduction as well as expulsions. It includes for example, the expulsion of billions of people from the official economy into informal grey zones, from which capital syphons wealth.

Another difference is that the geography of value transfers no longer fits neatly onto the old First World/Third World map, with the Second World somewhere else. New geographical and political patterns, with new dimensions of wealth transfers, have emerged. For example, we have the deindustrialisation of the old core through the movement of manufacturing to so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries. We have old colonial masters, such as Portugal, that have become dependent member states of the European Union, having to do whatever the Troika (International Monetary Fund, European Commission, and European Central Bank) tells them. And for the first time, significant populations in the Global North find themselves in a situation similar to those in the old periphery. There is a new form of imperialism that no longer has a clean geography of colonialists over here and colonised over there — it is more complicated.

Yet, despite these changes, imperialism remains the best term to refer to all this.

As you have noted, Marxist discussions on imperialism tend to strictly focus on the transfer of economic value. But you raise the need to consider the transfer of natural wealth and capacities for care. Could you explain how these transfers occur?

Let me start with the care economy, or what feminists called social reproductive labour. Social reproduction differs from the more general term societal reproduction, which encompasses everything that contributes to the continuation of a social formation. Social reproductive labour refers to the specific subset of activities that sustain daily replenishment and generational replacement of human beings who are the bearers of labour power — their biological reproduction, the provision and care work that sustains them on a daily basis, their socialisation and cultivation as members of specific classes in specific societies. These activities have historically been associated with women (although men have always performed some activities of reproductive nurturance, sustenance and care). And, historically, much of this activity (though not all of it) has occurred outside the circuits of the formal economy of capitalist societies. In fact, capitalism is unique in sharply separating waged work from social reproductive labour — often referred to as care. Yet the latter is necessary for the existence of waged work, the accumulation of surplus value and the functioning of capitalism. Wage labour could not exist in the absence of housework, child rearing, schooling, affective care and a host of other activities that help produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones.

Historically, capital took for granted that there would always be a steady supply of labour power.

But the conditions of early industrialisation were so destabilising that family conditions became basically impossible in many big industrialising cities of the capitalist core. That made the issue of social reproduction a political one. Later, wealthy countries with access to sufficient tax revenues created welfare states that assumed some public responsibility for social reproduction. But with neoliberalisation came disinvestment in social reproduction. Given women's broadscale entry into paid work, the question became who was going to take care of the household, the children, the aged, the neighbourhood — all that so-called women's work.

One strategy to fill the "care deficit" in wealthy countries was importing cheap care work from poor countries. Freeing up women's wage labour in rich countries required commodifying social reproductive work. The result was a flood of migrant women workers to perform this paid care work. Governments in poor countries, desperate for hard currency, actively promoted this emigration for the sake of remittances [money sent by immigrants back to their country of origin]. But this meant migrants had to transfer their own social reproductive work onto other, still poorer caregivers, who in turn had to do the same, and on and on. What we got was a bumping down of the care deficit from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South.

This has become so widespread that it has been theorised as a new dimension of imperialism — what feminists call "global care chains", which is a play on the more familiar term global commodity chains. The Filipino state, which depends on the export of women to do care work in Los Angeles, Israel, Gulf states, etc, is the poster child for this. I would recommend an article by Arlie Russell Hochschild, "[Love and gold](#)", where she explains how love is the new gold. Instead of exporting mineral wealth, countries are now exporting this newly monetised commodity.

Much of the same applies to natural wealth. Much like social reproductive work, capital has always treated nature as something that can be freely or cheaply appropriated for capital accumulation. Whether it is silver, cotton, tobacco, sugar or cocoa, transfers of natural wealth were crucial to the rise of capitalism, even during the early stages of so-called mercantile or slave capitalism. Later, industrialisation in Europe, North America and Japan depended upon extractivism in the periphery: Manchester's factories hummed due to the massive import of natural wealth from the American south and colonised regions.

The export of natural wealth has existed for a long time. But it has taken on a new dimension today due to the climate crisis. It is more apparent than ever that the issue is not just exporting natural wealth to the capitalist core but also exporting waste and the fallout of climate change to the periphery. We can no longer think of imperialism as taking good stuff from over there and using it here; we also have to think of dumping the bad stuff resulting from the seemingly good stuff over there. Of course, the idea that the fallout of climate breakdown can forever be exported elsewhere is an illusion, because the climate system is global. But it is communities over there who are currently bearing a hugely disproportionate share of the global environmental load.

That is why ecological imperialism is such an important and useful category. Some of the most exciting new works on imperialism focus not only on global care chains but theories of ecological load displacement and [unequal ecological exchange](#). None of this obviates the older focus on economic value extraction, but it shows that too much Marxian analysis of imperialism unwittingly took on board the capitalist understanding of wealth and missed these other dimensions.

You also use the concept of expropriation, alongside exploitation, when analysing imperialism. Could you explain what you mean by this?

The classical Marxist definition of exploitation refers to a situation of paid labour, where labour is sold in the labour market and the worker receives [compensation for their necessary labour time but](#)

[not their surplus labour time](#). Worker's wages only cover what is required to replenish their labour and produce new generations of workers, at least in theory. In this context, exploitation refers to the gap between the amount of value the worker produces and the amount they are compensated for their necessary labour time.

In contrast, expropriation, when talking about labour, refers to labour that is not even compensated for its necessary labour time. Prior to industrialisation, capital accumulation mainly occurred through the exploitation of unfree labour that was violently and brutally confiscated. Expropriation can also refer to the violent confiscation of land, animals and other forms of wealth. So, when I talk about expropriation, I am talking about the seizure of wealth — whether in the form of labour, land or other assets — that has been violently incorporated into circuits of capital accumulation. This is not a new idea: Luxemburg talked about something similar, as did David Harvey, who developed the concept of “[accumulation by dispossession](#)”.

Within traditional Marxism, there has been a tendency to think accumulation works overwhelmingly by exploitation. Yet expropriation has always been part of the story and continues to be so today. Far from being confined to the system's beginnings, it is a built-in feature of capitalist society, just like exploitation. The system cannot accumulate without expropriation. It is not possible to turn everything into free labour that is exploited in factories and paid the necessary costs to continue reproducing workers. Moreover, capital has a deep-seated interest in confiscating labour and natural wealth to raise profits. That is why expropriation underlies exploitation.

How does expropriation differ from super-exploitation, which also refers to labour that is paid less than its necessary labour time?

Super-exploitation is also used to talk about how workers of colour are paid less than white workers and therefore face higher rates of exploitation. I do not see this as wrong but, in my opinion, this views the issue in purely economic terms. Expropriation of labour is not just about extracting more value; it is also about status and hierarchy, and the fact that this labour is subjected to forms of coercion, violence, humiliation, etc, that are of a different order. Expropriation works not just as an economic mechanism of extraction, but through the political mechanism of coercion. Even in a country such as the United States, workers of colour are subjected to forced prison labour, police harassment, assault and even murder, as well as other forms of status denigration and humiliation. These are not unrelated to capital accumulation. That is why I view the category of super-exploitation as too economic.

I would add that, historically, the exploitation-expropriation distinction has roughly corresponded to the global colour-line. While European populations, after an initial period of expropriation, filled the ranks of the exploited working class, it was populations of colour in the hinterlands and colonised regions that continued to be expropriated. You cannot understand exploitation in the capitalist core without understanding its relation to expropriation in the periphery. Black Marxist thinkers such as WEB Du Bois, in his great book [Black Reconstruction](#), showed how the exploitation of the white industrial working classes in Europe and North America was inextricably entwined with the expropriation of Black enslaved workers.

What relative weight do mechanisms of imperialist expropriation and exploitation have today compared to the past?

Expropriation and exploitation have contributed to accumulation throughout the different phases of capitalist development, but in different ways. I am particularly interested in historicising the relationship between exploitation and expropriation during these different phases and looking at how the forms and relative weight of the two have changed over time.

For example, in financialised capitalism, debt has become a tremendously important mechanism of imperial extraction. It is used by global financial institutions to pressure states to slash social spending, enforce austerity and generally collude with investors in extracting value. Debt is also used to dispossess peasants in the Global South for corporate land grabs aimed at cornering supplies of energy, water, arable land and “carbon offsets”. And debt is crucial to accumulation in the core. For example, precarious service workers in the gig economy whose wages fall below the socially necessary costs of reproduction are forced to depend on expanded consumer credit.

At every level and in every region, debt is driving major new waves of expropriation. This has led to new, hybrid forms of expropriation and exploitation. For example, we have nominally free wage workers living in post-colonial countries so heavily burdened by sovereign debt that a huge amount of their labour goes to debt servicing. Something similar is occurring in wealthy regions: with the tremendous rise of consumer debt under neoliberalisation, workers who used to be merely exploited are now subject to forms of financial expropriation. These hybrid forms are blurring the old sharp division between enslaved Black expropriated workers and free exploited white workers. Now it is much muddier. That does not mean we do not have imperialism anymore; it is just more complicated to map these relations.

The original imperialist powers built their wealth and military might on colonial conquest and pillage of pre-capitalist societies. Have any new imperialist powers emerged since? And if so, what were the economic foundations of these new powers?

Leaving open the issue as to whether “actually existing” socialist states could have been defined as imperialist — which is a complicated question — there is no doubt in my mind that some post-Communist states are imperialist. The poster child for this is China. I believe imperialism is the right term to use to describe the extractivism China is practising in Africa. This is true even if China is not carrying this out in the same way that US or European corporations did; in China’s case, we are not dealing with conquest and direct colonial exploitation.

In light of what has occurred in financialised capitalism, can transnational enterprises now operate successfully without an institutional anchorage in an imperialist power?

Financialisation has led to a shift in state-corporation power dynamics, with corporations having more power and states, including powerful states, having less. Today we have gigantic global corporations whose wealth in many cases eclipses that of relatively substantial states. These corporate powers have been unleashed from the control of territorial states, often headquartering themselves in tax havens such as Andorra — hardly a capitalist power. They constantly push up against state power, even in the US, which is nominally the hegemonic state of our time (though if the US remains hegemonic, it is certainly a hegemonic state in steep decline). The US state does not control Apple or Google. So, we are no longer in a situation where we can really speak of companies that are “national champions” clearly located in a nation-state and which the state gives all kinds of breaks and advantages to it. It is a different ballgame now.

That said, I think it is too early to give a definitive answer as to whether transnational enterprises can operate without an institutional anchorage in an imperialist power. The US can still rely on the power of the US dollar, which is the world’s currency when it comes to the monetary system, the banking system, the ability to transfer funds, etc. Moreover, US property law has basically become international law in the form of the TRIPS [Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights] agreement. Katharina Pistor has a good book, [*The Code of Capital*](#), which looks at how US legal understandings of property, dispute resolution, contracts law, etc have all gone global as an extension, if not exactly of US state power, of the US’ legal regime. Whether this means the US government can actually control Apple is a different question.

How should we understand the growing US-China rivalry in light of the fact that the two economies are more integrated than ever? And how do you view current dynamics within global capitalism given it is not just traditional imperialist powers, such as the US and Israel, launching full-scale wars, but also Russia, and even Turkey and Saudi Arabia, deploying military power beyond their borders?

There is a lot of testing of the US going on. Militarily, the US remains very powerful, although it is not the only state with nuclear weapons. Economically, it is a mixed bag. And morally, its credibility is very weakened. As for Israel's current war on Gaza, as an American Jew, I have to say that I am outraged that the US has not helped stop this by simply turning off the spigot. Israel is a country where the US has a lot of leverage. But that is not the case everywhere.

For example, we have the rise of China as a great economic power trying to figure out exactly when and how to assert itself on the global political stage. This is still a work in progress: China is hovering on the brink, flexing a lot of muscle but still deciding whether, when, and how to step out. This has led people to question whether China will become a new hegemonic power or whether some kind of new multipolar arrangement will emerge. We also have Russia, which is very much a declining power with a rather weak hand, but one that [Russian president Vladimir] Putin — whatever else we might think of him — has played rather well. Russia punches well above its weight in world politics, with influence not just in bordering countries but in Syria, Africa and elsewhere. And we have China, Russia, Turkey, Iran and some other countries starting to form a block against the US. Meanwhile, the European Union is basically non-functional as a serious political player on the geopolitical level for all kinds of reasons such as internal divisions and the structure of the union.

As you said, the economies of China and the US are very integrated. That puts a break on things. But there are also wildcards in the mix, such as the looming possibility of a Trump presidency. In terms of disentangling the economies, we could see certain tariffs imposed. And we may see some new sabre rattling — though Trump, with his America First isolationism, is slightly more rational when it comes to foreign policy than the foreign policy establishment. But whatever happens, we are in for a very rocky ride. There are reasons to be very worried by the absence of any stable hegemony. The US is out of control and does not know what it is doing. This could lead it to do some very stupid things. These are dangerous times.

Do you see possibilities for building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles? More generally, in light of what we have discussed, what could 21st century anti-imperialism and anti-capitalist internationalism look like?

There are possibilities, but how likely they are to be realised is another question. As I said, we are living in dangerous times. We could at any moment slide into some kind of horrific nuclear or world war. We face planetary meltdown due to the ecological crisis. And there is tremendous precarity and insecurity in terms of livelihood, even in wealthy parts of the world.

Under these extreme conditions of crisis, in which normal certainties have broken down, many people are willing to reconsider what is politically feasible. This has opened space for those left-wing forces willing to think through the kind of new alliances we need for these times. But we have also seen the rise of right-wing — and in some cases proto-fascists or at least authoritarian — populists. These are all responses to the breakdown of bourgeois hegemony (in the Gramscian rather than geopolitic sense).

I have been thinking about these questions since [the] 2008 [Global Economic Crisis] and the Occupy movement [in 2011]. At times, I have been more optimistic about the prospects for an

emancipatory left to build anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist alliances. At other times, it seemed the far right has been more successful in channelling dissatisfaction. But the point is that we have no other option but to fight for a new anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist internationalism — one that is feminist, anti-racist, democratic and green. All these adjectives point to legitimate existential concerns of people in motion. We are not in a position to say, for example, that struggles against police violence are less important than struggles against climate: for those experiencing police violence, nothing could be more important.

What gives me a little bit of hope is the fact that at the root of all these issues are not discrete, separate problems. Instead, they are all traceable to the same source, which I call “[cannibal capitalism](#)” in my latest book. I try to show how it is a built-in structural tendency of capitalist society to cannibalise nature, care, the wealth of subjugated peoples, and the energies and creativity of all working people. If we can get more people to understand these links, then broader alliances will begin to make sense. Somehow, we have to figure out how to put all these things together, without ranking oppressions. Ultimately, none of these distinct movements are powerful enough to make the kind of change we need on their own.

P.S.

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