

Marxism and Imperialism

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The relationship between Marxism and imperialism has been established since the writings of Marx himself. Particularly in *Capital, Volume I*, Marx discusses the international division of labour caused by the expansion of capital in Ch.15, English capital in Ireland in Ch.25, as well as engaging with a theory of colonialism in Ch.33 ([1867] 1992a). Marx's own views on both colonialism and imperialism have been well discussed in critical analysis of both his well- and lesser-known texts, many of which are presented in the compendium text '*On Colonialism*' (Marx & Engels 2001; see, also, Pradella 2013; Nimitz 2002). However, the study of imperialism post-Marx grew from a belief that, while some analysis of imperialism was present in the works of Marx, a dedicated analysis of the state and the international sphere had been left at an embryonic stage. This is broadly true but this view has received criticism based on historiographical analysis of both Marx and the earliest authors on imperialism (Pradella 2013). The phenomenon of imperialism, while still discussed by Marx in a number of instances, was not given the same sustained critical attention as other issues in Marx's work. This is the point at which Marxism's engagement with imperialism becomes more profound and substantial. Imperialism, therefore, to Marxism has always been a 'problem' of some form.

Indeed, the 'problem' of imperialism derives from a number of perceived sources: gaps in Marx's own writing; an explanation for why capitalism endures; an account of the phenomenon of globalisation. It is the contention of this chapter, then, that the on-going relationship between Marxism and imperialism reveals one of Marxism's main strengths, and its clear weaknesses. It reveals Marxism's capacity to explain new phenomena coupled with a rigorous and critical method; however, it also reveals a reliance on systemic explanations for contingent developments, and a considerable partisanship between radical thinkers.

This relationship between Marxism and imperialism therefore begins early in the 20th Century with the work of the 'classical' authors of imperialism, building on the work of Marx and critiquing extant understandings of imperialism, particularly John Hobson's. This chapter charts the origins of this relationship and its various iterations throughout the 20th century until the present. This relationship has, fundamentally, changed very little, deriving largely from Marx's own work, and the work of the first Marxist theorists of imperialism. Indeed, the relationship is iterative rather than developmental, with particular ideas within Marxist theories of imperialism recurring perpetually. Most notably, the overarching power of Finance, or monopoly capital, within capitalism, and the idea of imperialism as a qualitatively distinct 'stage' of capitalist development are extremely powerful ideas within the tradition of Marxist theories of imperialism.

The paper will be split into three sections according to various 'phases' of Marxist thought on imperialism: firstly, the 'classical' Marxists, from Hilferding to Lenin; secondly, the 'neo-Colonialist' thinkers; and finally, the 'New' imperialists.

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The first Marxist theorists of imperialism, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, sought to link contemporary international political developments to the nature of capitalism itself. The developing tensions between European states, it was argued, resulted from a need for states to secure control over foreign territories as an outlet for surplus capital (Bukharin [1916] 2003; Luxemburg [1913] 1951; Lenin [1916] 2010). Alongside these systemic pressures, the early field of study was also shaped by the role of particular agency, especially financiers and bankers (Hilferding, [1910] 1981). A notable division between those regarding capitalism as leading inevitably to conflict, and those who believed that such tendencies could be tamed by social and political reform, was apparent too with this distinction being most clearly articulated by the dialogue between Kautsky (1914) and Lenin ([1916] 2010).

From Hilferding onwards, however, is the idea that existing Marxist texts lacked an explanation for the phenomenon of imperialism. Hence, Otto Bauer described Hilferding's *Finanzcapital* the 'fourth volume' of Capital, addressing the international and imperial rivalries (and their origins) in a fashion not present in the three volumes of Capital itself. The explanation for Hilferding ([1910] 1981) for the development of this phenomenon lies in the relationship between capital and the state, particularly the overwhelming power of monopoly capital over the state.

While Hilferding's approach laid a foundation for an analysis of imperialism, his approach focuses on the unification of capital within the 'metropolis' rather than on an analysis of relationships between states. It is Bukharin who develops, perhaps, the first 'theory' of imperialism, though his reliance on Hilferding's work is clear. Hilferding's imperialism was inextricably linked to the notion of monopoly: the conglomeration of the fractions of capital into finance capital controlled by bankers. Hilferding's understanding of the development of imperialism springs forth from the inherent tendencies of capitalism itself, as well as the personal direction of specific actors.

'A circle of people emerges who, thanks to their own capital resources or to the concentrated power of outside capital which they represent (in the case of bank directors), become members of the boards of directors of numerous corporations. There develops in this way a kind of personal union, on one side among the various corporations themselves, and on the other, between the corporations and the bank.'
(ibid.:119-120)

Hilferding (ibid.:319) then links the power of monopoly capitalism to the inherently crisis-prone nature of capitalism, and the role of the state in resolving those crises:

'As has always been the case, when capital first encounters conditions which contradict its need for valorization, and could only be overcome much too slowly and gradually by purely economic means, it has recourse to the power of the state and uses it for forcible expropriation in order to create the required free wage proletariat.'

Hilferding also maintains that while capitalism, as a social relation, may exist everywhere, it is only when a state associated with an 'export capital' is in control of a territory that the process of surplus value extraction is at its most efficient.

'This explains why all capitalists with interests in foreign countries call for a strong state whose authority will protect their interests even in the most remote corners of the globe, and for showing the national flag everywhere so that the flag of trade can also be planted everywhere.' (ibid.:320)

As with Hilferding, subsequent authors also saw a problem of imperialism for Marxism. Lenin introduces Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy* by emphasising that the study of imperialism is the only means to understand political developments of the day

'The problem of imperialism is not only a most essential one, but, we may say, it is the most essential problem in that realm of economic science which examines the changing forms of capitalism in recent times. Everyone interested not only in economics but in any sphere of present-day social life must acquaint himself with the facts relating to this problem... Needless to say that there can be no concrete historical analysis of the present war if that analysis does not have for its basis a full understanding of the nature of imperialism, both from its economic and political aspects.' ([1915] 2003: 8)

Bukharin (ibid.:152), following Hilferding, argues that not only is monopoly capital important to understanding imperialism but that, without it, imperialism would not be possible. Indeed, this is a view shared by Lenin ([1916] 2010:46) also, declaring monopoly capital the 'essence' of imperialism.¹ As with Hilferding, Bukharin clearly links imperialism to the valorisation of capital, in that it 'is nothing more but a process of a continuous reproduction of the contradictions of capitalism on an ever wider scale' (ibid:153). This is a view shared by all Marxist theorists of imperialism but especially clear in the earlier authors, sketching out the link between Marx and the spread of capitalism across the globe. Indeed, as Luxemburg ([1913] 1951: 365) notes, 'capital needs the means of production and the labour power of the whole globe for untrammelled accumulation; it cannot manage without the natural resources and the labour power of all territories'.

While there are a number of similarities within the works of authors on classical imperialism, it is possible to characterize these authors as using very similar methods to understand how capitalism developed a particular form at the beginning of the twentieth century. These methods are, principally, understanding the state as an instrument of the will of bankers, and presenting imperialism as a specific and pre-determined period of capitalism (Sutton 2013). Kautsky (1916:18), while also offering an instrumentalist conception of the state, avoids the problem of periodization by emphasising the contingent nature of extant accounts of imperialism, arguing that it is not a pre-determined period of capitalist development. Indeed, Lenin ([1916] 2010:142) quotes Kautsky in order to criticise his claims of contingency as mere 'Socialist-chauvinist' claptrap:

¹ The similarities between Bukharin and Lenin are perhaps more striking than any other authors within this broad grouping.

'Cannot the present imperialist policy be supplanted by a new, ultraimperialist policy, which will introduce the joint exploitation of the world by internationally united finance capital in place of the mutual rivalries of national finance capitals?'

Lenin rejected Kautsky's view since, he argued, states developed unevenly in capitalism and, therefore, national interests were constantly shifting and there could be no stable 'ultraimperialist' policy, only the ultimately terminal impulsion to competition and conflict of the imperial stage of capital (ibid.). For Lenin, Kautsky had rejected Marx entirely and joined the ranks of 'bourgeois writers', thus leading Lenin to label Kautsky's idea of 'ultraimperialism' as 'ultra-nonsense' (ibid.:35).

Lenin's argument is clear that imperialism is both a necessary and the highest stage of capitalist development. McDonough (1995:364) argues that Lenin's work, along with the earliest Marxist authors on imperialism, represents the pivotal moment in resolving the 'first crisis of Marxism' as its introduction of a 'stage theory of capitalism' to Marxist thought helped to explain capitalist recovery instead of revolution. However, the subordination of the contingent developments in global society to a deterministic understanding of capitalist development remained highly problematic for these particular understandings of imperialism, especially given that the historical developments of the twentieth century led not to system-destroying warfare but, rather, to something closer to the 'bourgeois' understanding of imperialism held by Kautsky.

However, also problematic within these accounts is the emphasis placed on the role of Finance. These authors are not simply arguing the power of banks and their domination of the state is a particular or contingent aspect of the imperial form of capitalism, but inextricably linked to an understanding of capitalist production as teleological. In other words, the arguments offered by these early theorists were ill-equipped to explain capitalism that did not follow this particular form.

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The historical developments of the early twentieth century, particularly the global wars of the period, devastated the European system of empires. This triggered the demise of the Eurocentric world order, led to the onset of decolonisation and facilitated the rise of the United States. This historical turn, therefore, undermined the original theorists of imperialism. Not only had, apparently, European states withdrawn from their empires but the dominant world power was now a self-declared anti-imperial world power. Therefore, the concept was ostracized from the scholarly mainstream during the post-1945 era.

However, imperialism continued to be theorized and accounted for. The main focus was now no longer centered on themes of rivalry and warfare, but on the changing nature of international capitalism, the qualities of the 'world system', and on questions about economic dependency, underdevelopment and the relations between core and peripheral states (Frank 1966, 1978, 1980; Baran and Sweezy 1968; Galtung 1971; Cohen 1973; Wallerstein 1974; 1975, 1980, 1989; Mandel 1975; Amin 1977; Frank & Gills 1993; Arrighi 1994). However, the continuities between this 'second wave' of scholars and the earlier scholars are quite remarkable. Rather than a revolution in the theorization of imperialism, these later scholars were highly dependent on the key concepts developed by earlier authors.

The 'second wave' of theories of imperialism occurred in the 1960s and 1970s and is generally synonymous with Dependency Theory and World System Theory (Brewer 1990:161), and developed from earlier ideas of uneven development, monopoly capital and a stage theory of capitalism (Soldatenko 1982:41; McDonough 2007:258). Amin (1977:112) accepts the Leninist notion that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism since it is the most exploitative stage of capitalism, and therefore the 'highest' stage of capitalism.

The authors of the 'second wave' characterised the world economy according to zones of development: core, semi-periphery and periphery with surplus value being channelled from periphery to core states. These theories argued that dependent territories are kept in a perpetual state of under-development in the interests of monopoly capital in the core countries. This allows advanced, monopoly capital to continue to exploit these territories without competition from native production, and without a working class consciousness developing there. Where the earliest authors on imperialism emphasised the competition between states, the authors of the 'second wave' emphasised the importance of changes in international capitalism, particularly the dependency and uneven development between core and periphery states (Kettell & Sutton 2013:4). This development in the literature does, to some degree, approximate Kautsky's notion of 'ultraimperialism', in emphasising a harmonisation of interests between 'core', or imperialist, states.

One further development of this characterisation led not just to a typology of states but also to a typology of class. Amin (1977:115) identifies core working class, and periphery working class, each with their respective bourgeoisie. They can be considered distinct in that they are divided nationally, holding apparently separate cultural and social values and interests. As such the periphery bourgeoisie can be anti-imperialist allies to the periphery working class, so too can the core working class be pro-imperialist along with their respective bourgeoisie. However, this is an acceptance of the manner in which imperial relations present themselves in capitalism – not as global capitalist relations but rather as the relations between nationally constituted states.

To some extent, then, these approaches diminished the role of agency, focusing instead on the role of the 'world-system', and its typology of states to account for the persistence of capitalism not just in what Hilferding initially referred to as the 'metropolis', but also the allegedly independent former colonies. Considering the debt owed to Lenin by these theories, it is not surprising that the emphasis would be on such a structuralist account. The key development of these theories, building on earlier Marxist authors, was to account for an imperialism that was neither formally territorially bounded nor prone to system-threatening competition between imperial states (Song 2011:293). However, the same problems resurfaced in 'second wave' accounts as with the 'classical' Marxist accounts; namely, a stage theory of history, the role played by monopoly capital and, therefore, the presentation of contingent developments as necessary aspects of capitalist social relations. Furthermore, new problems emerged from the effort to resolve issues with the first theories, particularly a reliance on an explanation of state behaviour that split class along national lines.

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During the latter years of the twentieth century the concept of imperialism remained at the academic margins. The principle means of understanding imperialism was now framed in terms of the debate on 'globalisation', particularly from the mid-1970s, which argued that the role and power of the state was being undermined by a before-unseen level of capitalist accumulation (Pozo-Martin 2006). The resurgence of imperialism as a field of study during the early years of the twenty-first century was once again linked to an assertion that *this* form of imperialism was also both qualitatively distinct and unique. Denoting a figurative as well as a literal shift from 'old' to 'new' imperialism, the view from many quarters was that imperialism was not merely 'back' but more profoundly exploitative than ever.²

David Harvey's account (2003:116) of the New Imperialism highlights the importance of understanding how capital must valorise and the role of the state in resolving blockages to the circuit of capital on a global scale. Harvey however relies on the idea of the neo-liberal state, deriving from an apparent caesura in the 1970s, the shift from Fordism to 'flexible' accumulation, and the ensuing turn from modernity to postmodernity, to substantiate his idea of contemporary imperialism. Harvey (1990:124) lays the foundation for this by declaring, 'the contrasts between present political-economic practices and those of the post-war boom period are sufficiently strong to make the hypothesis of a shift from Fordism to what might be called a 'flexible' regime of accumulation a telling way to characterize history'. To Harvey (ibid.:171), this movement to a 'flexible regime' is concomitant with the shift to Postmodernism, emphasizing 'the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism'. In critique of Harvey, Meiksins Wood (1997:540) characterizes his position as the following:

'Postmodernity then corresponds to a phase of capitalism where mass production of standardized goods, and the forms of labour associated with it, have been replaced by flexibility, new forms of production – 'lean production', the 'team concept', 'just-in-time' production, diversification of commodities for niche markets, a 'flexible' labour force, mobile capital and so on, all made possible by new informational technologies.'

Harvey's understanding of a change within capitalism from modernity to postmodernity has already been well-critiqued as the periodization of capitalist society, used to explain the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation (Meiksins Wood 1997).

However, his is also true of Wood (2005:134) who argues that the New Imperialism rests on a 'Universal Capitalism' – one in which capitalism has already expanded to incorporate the entire globe, requiring a new type of imperialism based on 'economic domination' rather than the rivalry of nation states that characterised 'old imperialism'. Harvey (2007:60) criticises Wood's (2005:100) typologies of both imperialism and capitalism as unable to fully explain the dynamic

² There is both a lack of clarity, and some irony, in the term 'New Imperialism' to describe this development in the literature. In terms of the latter, the phrase 'New Imperialism' has been used since the very first dedicated study of imperialism by Hobson ([1902] 1968) to emphasise that this new 'phase' of imperialism rested both on conflict and competition between empires, as well as the power of finance over the state. Marxist authors on imperialism owe a great deal to Hobson's account. In terms of the former, the use of the term 'New Imperialism' in the literature could potentially refer to either a new theoretical approach to understanding imperialism, or a qualitatively distinct form of imperialism (Harvey 2007:57; Kettell & Sutton 2013:6-20).

changes in global capitalism. Harvey (2007:67) acknowledges that neither he nor Wood (2005) did a 'very good job' of theorising the state in their accounts of imperialism, which incites him to exhort, 'Not only do we need a new theory of imperialism to match the conditions of our time but we also need a new theory of the capitalist state'.

For Harvey, 'around 1970 or so' is the beginning of the third stage of the global rule of the bourgeoisie (2003:60). This, he declares, saw 'a different kind of system emerge' that was quintessentially neo-liberal in character, transforming the state itself into a different 'type' of state. (ibid.:62). Indeed, Harvey is explicit that this shift to a newer imperialism only occurs due to the transition from Fordist to flexible accumulation, and leading to a ascendant financial power (ibid.:64). In fact, Harvey's emphasis upon the power of the 'Wall Street-Treasury-IMF' complex, as financial power over the state, is highly redolent of the earliest theories of imperialism, which rested on the idea of finance capital requiring the state to undertake imperialism.

The focus for Harvey, and the New Imperialism more broadly, has, unlike prior accounts, focused almost solely on the actions of a single state: the United States, emphasising both its military dominance and its position as the centre of global financial capital. As the dominant power within the international state system, this is perhaps understandable but not entirely unproblematic, and has received considerable criticism from Marxist authors. Hardt and Negri (2000) term contemporary global society as 'Empire' and criticise the US-centric approach of Harvey. To Hardt and Negri (ibid.:xii), Empire is a decentralised and deterritorialised global power structure. Empire has four distinct aspects: firstly, Empire is global; secondly, Empire appears eternal; thirdly, Empire pervades every aspect of society; fourthly, Empire is exceedingly violent but appears peaceful (ibid.:xv). Empire, therefore, seeks to reconcile the apparent deterritorialisation of imperialism with continued exploitation and the inherent violence of capitalism; however, this account becomes, in effect, indistinguishable from an account of capitalism itself and therefore provides nothing other than an abstract understanding of capitalism divorced from the still-extant features of the international state system (Kiely 2005:48). This critique is also made by Wood (2002; 2005:6) of Hardt and Negri, who she argues accept the superficial qualities of globalisation and miss something 'truly essential' about both capitalism and imperialism, namely a robust understanding of the state.

This critique has also found substantial purchase elsewhere. Pozo-Martin (2006:236), Panitch and Gindin (2006) and Robinson (2007:8) argue that an under-theorisation of the state is characteristic of most scholarship on the 'New Imperialism', including Gowan (1999), Harvey (2003) and Callinicos (2005a; 2005b). Callinicos' (2010:82-4) response to this is to invoke a form-analysis understanding of the state. However, Callinicos (ibid.) rejects form-analysis as more problematic than useful, leading him to accept a 'broadly Gramscian approach' to imperialism (ibid.:99).

The New Imperialism developed following debates over 'globalisation' and the international proliferation of 'neo-liberal' ideology. These authors sought to explain the sudden and massive expansion of credit within the global economy, as well as to account for a perceived 'hollowing out' of the state. However, from this particular historical context derives the literature's fundamental problems, which, again, have not fundamentally resolved the problems of the first Marxist theorists of imperialism. Firstly, the consensus on the New Imperialism is that we are, yet again, in a distinct phase of capitalism. Secondly, the role of Finance dominates

explanations of the behaviour of states, and the nature of this New Imperialism. Finally, perhaps distinctively in this new phase of scholarship on imperialism, is that this apparent historical shift away from the state also led to authors themselves neglecting the role of the state in understanding imperialism.

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This relationship between Marxism and imperialism has been an illuminating one, highlighting not just the enduring value of Marxist scholarship on imperialism but also its persistent problems. Most notably, these problems derive from a conflation of factors contingent of and necessary to capitalist social relations, which themselves derive from, perhaps, an emphasis on theory over historical research. Broadly lacking in Marxist theories of imperialism is a sustained engagement with historical scholarship, as well as a neglect of the specific relationships between states and the everyday 'minutiae' of capitalism. Rather these accounts have generally focused more on 'top down', systemic theories of imperialism. As such Marxist theories of imperialism have almost always invoked finance, or monopoly, capital to explain the phenomenon, which they have also sought to identify as a particular and discrete historical period of capitalism. These theories have changed, of course, depending on their particular historical circumstances. The first theories sought to explain imperial rivalries leading to a system-threatening war, the second wave of theories sought to explain the continued inequality between Western and post-colonial states, while the latest wave of Marxist thought has sought to incorporate globalisation and the apparent retreat of the state.

More recent developments in understandings of imperialism in Marxist scholarship have centred on the debate between so-called neo-Gramscian and open Marxist theories of the state. Most obvious in this debate is the limited engagement either approach has had with the other, leading to highly partisan scholarship by both sets of authors.³ The main distinction between these two groups is that, while open Marxists sought to demystify the nature of capitalism by a return to Marx himself, neo-Gramscian scholarship sought to base an understanding of modern capitalism upon the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The value offered by both of these approaches, however, is in their desire to theorise the state, offering a rigorous critical lens through which to understand the changing conditions of capitalist social relations. Given the development of Marxist theories of imperialism over the course of the 20th century, and their problems stemming from a lack of sustained analysis of the origins of state action, this more recent debate, although partisan, offers to inject new vigour into a Marxist understanding of imperialism.

³ See, for example, Bieler, Bruff & Morton (2010), Bieler & Morton (2009), Bonefeld (2009), Bruff (2009b; 2009a), Burnham (1991)

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