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As the Capitalist World Turns: From Empire to Imperialism to Globalization?



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One can only wonder what Marx, let alone Lenin, would think of the current nature of global capitalism. It has realized their worst nightmares, becoming a system of tyranny and plunder but without a redemptive, revolutionary dialectic.

The radical left has for the last century-and-a-half been guided by Marx's analysis – and utopian vision – of capitalism, its inherent contradictions and its inevitable supersession

by “communism”. That the proletariat could – and would! – overturn the bourgeoisie and the economic system of commodity exchange would be superseded by a world based on social equality, shared wealth and ecological harmony — from each according to his/her ability to each according to her/his need.

Does anyone still believe in this possibility, let alone the critical analysis that fostered it? And, if not, is a radical alternative possible?

Sadly, Marx’s proletariat – the vanguard of the working class – seems vanquished, having disappeared from the historical stage; Lenin’s vanguard party fulfilled its historic mission two decades ago when the once-upon-a-time Soviet Union collapsed, with state socialism superseded by a corrupt mafia syndicate ruling Russia; and Mao’s China has morphed into a giant state-run corporatist enterprise. Insurgent movements in Latin American, Asia or Africa have been either crushed, integrated into the capitalist state or, like Cuba, hold on for dear life.

In the U.S., shrinking unions desperately fight to survive; socialists – oops, “democratic socialist” – are but well-intentioned shadows of corporate (i.e., “progressive”) Democrats; politics has been reduced to personal identity; grassroots insurgents stalked by the local-federal intelligence security state; and hard-core radicals rant on in college classrooms, street corners and websites like old-time preachers baying at the moon. The future of revolutionary possibility looks pretty bleak.

What happened to the radical utopian – socialist, communist, anarchist – vision that was, over the last century-and-half, the North Star of social possibility? The revolutionary “left” in all its manifestations fought bravely in the Paris Commune of 1871, at Kronstadt in 1921, Detroit in 1933, Barcelona in 1937, Hungary in 1956, Chicago in 1968, Soweto in 1976, Occupy in 2011, Charlottesville in 2017 and in still other innumerable battles across the globe.

Most worrisome for Americans, a major confrontation seems to be brewing. Donald Trump and the reactionary, Christian right are provoking it, but a deeper structural crisis is at play. While fueled by white-nationalist resentment, the 1 percent are squeezing every cent they can from the nation’s working people, fearful that the “shit” will soon hit the fan. Capitalism seems to be undergoing a fundamental and unstoppable transition – one most simply conceived as a further evolution from empire to imperialism to globalization.

The world has always been whole. Since the days of the first European explorers – and colonizers – of the 15th century, the ties that bind the global economy have grown ever

tighter. Many economists and historians from all ideological perspectives have mapped out the maturation of capitalism's internationalization. Eric Hobsbawm did so in four useful works:

The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848

The Age of Capital: 1848-1875

The Age of Empire: 1875-1914

The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991

These works frame the phases of capitalism's modern era of development. The post-1991 phase, from the collapse of the Soviet Union to today, is the current era of globalization. (PDF copies of Hobsbawm's books are available online.)

Hobsbawm's studies, and those of many others, reveal that nearly-all European nation-states – e.g., England, France, Spain, Portugal — secured foreign territories scattered across the globe and, through them, forged distinct empires. The ceaseless warfare between these states — like those between the British and the Dutch, followed by the French and the Spanish — carved up the vast territories of North America, eventually settling into the three nation states of Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. Other parts of the world faced a similar fate.

The theories of Marx and Lenin set the parameters of much of the theorizing about the growth – and restructuring – of capitalism over the last 150 years, especially among academic scholars, policy wonks and radical politics. Their works established a framework of analysis for the transformation of capitalism that can be simplified as its evolution from “empire” to “imperialism.” For both Marx and Lenin, capitalism was a dialectical whole, enveloping both local/national and global/international relations as well as both social/political and personal/cultural elements.

Marx believed that capitalism was a global system and, in the *Grundrisse*, noted: “The tendency to create a world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself.” In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels assumed: “National differences and antagonism between people are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.”

However, Marx considered colonialism — foreign expansion into peripheral or pre-capitalist territories like Ireland and India — as an integral aspect of British capitalist development. Writing in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1863, he observed, “England has to fulfill a double mission in India; one destructive, the other regenerative — the

annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the foundations of Western society in Asia.” India finally got its independence in 1947.

Within the socialist left, the issue of colonialism became a major issue during the pre-WW-I era. Initially pushed by Karl Kautsky, with critical support (but differing analyses) from Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Nikolai Bukharin and Rudolf Hilferding, the issue split the radical left with many socialists supporting colonization for nationalistic purposes.

Lenin’s 1916 pamphlet, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, was written as a rejoinder to Kautsky’s theory of “Ultra Imperialism,” that capitalism was morphing into yet another stage of development. Lenin put his concept of imperialism in a nutshell, observing:

The typical ruler of the world became finance capital, a power that is peculiarly mobile and flexible, peculiarly intertwined at home and internationally, peculiarly devoid of individuality and divorced from the immediate processes of production, peculiarly easy to concentrate, a power that has already made peculiarly long strides on the road to concentration, so that literally several hundred billionaires and millionaires hold in their hands the fate of the whole world.

More significant, Kautsky opposed the vanguard party tactics of the Lenin-led Bolshevik Party and, thus, in the wake of the Russian Revolution and the collapse of the German workers movement, his theories were all but forgotten.

The Italian Marxist, Pietro Di Nardo, argues, “Lenin believed that once the whole world had been divided up between the advanced capitalist countries, the struggle between inter-imperialist forces would be to keep control of what they had already conquered.” Remarkably, in the half-century since WW-II, other than wars at the periphery of European-American power, imperialism held.

Now, as the 21st century takes shape, capitalism seems to be facing a new era of instability. Put simply, today’s capitalism seems like something more than merely an extension of 20th century world order.

Lenin’s notion of imperialism was conceived at a time when European capitalism faced an historically unimaginable catastrophe, the Great War. The old-capitalist order, anchored in the British empire, collapsed during WW-I, suffered through the Great Depression and WW-II before it regained world dominance with U.S. ascendancy during the Cold War and the consumer revolution.

The notion of a “new” phase of capitalism, something superseding Lenin’s imperialism, is based on a simple hypothesis: U.S. global hegemony might be coming to an end. Today, U.S. imperialism is anchored in \$600-plus billion annual military budget and an estimated [1,000 military bases](#) operating in 80 countries across the globe. How long this military-state system of global hegemony can continue is an open question.

The world’s only superpower has slowly but steadily lost its grip. The U.S. permanent-war machine began to unravel when the CIA failed to topple the Cuban Revolution, when the military was defeated in Vietnam and in the unraveling of innumerable clandestine interventions in Latin/South America and other parts of the world (e.g., South Africa). The U.S.’s stalled war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and other parts of the Middle East are but further examples of [the limits of military imperialism](#).

The belief in a new, post-Leninist notion of capitalist globalization is grounded in a variety of complementary factors. They include:

- (i) the stagnation of wages and rise of inequality in the U.S. (and parts of Europe) that is now in its fourth decade, thus fostering popular unrest that culminated in Trump’s election;
- (ii) the rise of the structurally unstable financial sector anchored in institutional consolidation and an instantaneous transactional economy facilitated by the Internet;
- (iii) the rise of destabilizing non-capitalist insurgencies (e.g., religious fundamentalist, nationalist movements) in “developing” or peripheral countries; and
- (iv) the ever-worsening environmental crisis realized in global warming, increased wildfires, hurricanes and other expressions. Finally, the very real challenge posed by China — especially over the next couple of decades — to U.S. economic hegemony and the re-anchoring of capitalism outside the U.S./Europe orbit. Together, these factors suggest a possible new world order, but one grounded in instability.

Academic journals are filled with numerous formal studies as to the current state of global capitalism. Among those offering a more “orthodox” analysis are Samir Amin, David Harvey, Istvan Meszaros and John Foster. Among those challenging the traditional analysis are Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, in their 2001 book, *Empire*, as well as Hamid Hosseini and Patrick Wolfe. (Their individual works are easily accessed online.)

This debate is important because it helps define the current machinations of American economic, political and social life. It also helps shape the vision of “revolutionary” movements that could effectively challenge capitalist rule. Amidst this turmoil and

uncertainty, what happened to the utopian promise inherent in revolutions envisioned by Marx, Bakunin, Lenin and so many others?