
SYMPOSIUM

Imperialism, Anti-Imperialism, and the Global Class Struggle

INTRODUCTION

One of the most urgent challenges facing the left is the need to come to terms with the meanings of “imperialism” and “anti-imperialism” in our time. When the workers of the world are facing increasingly dire conditions of labor and survival, and the possibility of direct military confrontation between and among the globe’s major economic powers seems less remote every day, it is crucially important for Marxists to assess the nature of the international class struggle in the current conjuncture.

Has the term “imperialism” lost its applicability in an era of transnational capital flows; or has it retained its relevance to present-day global patterns of exploitation, precarity, and inequality? Can multipolarity counter the inherited racialized domination of the rest of the globe by the United States of America and its allies in the West/global North; or will it, in the name of anti-imperialism, reinforce existing class divisions in the global South? Answers to these questions are not only theoretically challenging but also vitally important to the formation of a revolutionary practice that can liberate humanity from the yoke of capital.

In the summer of 2023, William Robinson wrote two articles that address these matters head-on: “The ‘Socialism of Fools’ of the ‘Anti-Imperialist’ Left” (<https://portside.org/2023-08-07/socialism-fools-anti-imperialist-left>); and “The Travesty of ‘Anti-Imperialism’” (*Journal of World-Systems Research*, Vol. 29, Issue 2). His views, when shared with other members of the Editorial and Advisory Boards of *Science & Society*, provoked a number of spirited responses. The

Manuscript Collective of the journal invited William to summarize his thinking; called upon his interlocutors to respond; and asked William to react to their commentaries.

This symposium is the result of that process. Readers of the journal are invited to continue the conversation by contributing Communications to subsequent issues. Bearing in mind Marx's call to interpret the world in order to change it, *Science & Society* is honored to host this rich and stimulating discussion.

BARBARA FOLEY

5 Roosevelt Place #6-O
Montclair NJ 07042
bfoley@rutgers.edu

IMPERIALISM, ANTI-IMPERIALISM, AND TRANSNATIONAL CLASS EXPLOITATION

Imperialism has become among the left what Raymond Williams referred to as a keyword—the problem of the meaning is “inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss.” For Williams (1976, 13–14), these words “could not really be thought through and some of them cannot even be focused unless we are conscious of the words as elements of the problem.” If imperialism, as one such keyword, “is understood primarily as an economic system or external investment and the penetration and control of markets and sources of raw materials, political changes in the status of colonies or former colonies will not greatly affect description of the continuing economic system as imperialist,” he concludes. “Like any word which refers to fundamental social and political conflicts, imperialism cannot be reduced, semantically, to a single proper meaning. Its important historical and contemporary variations of meanings point to real processes which have to be studied in their own terms” (*Ibid.*, 131–132).

What then is the “problem” of imperialism, the “real processes that have to be studied in their own terms”? In the summer of 2023, I published three essays (Robinson, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c) that attempted to answer the question of imperialism and anti-imperialism in the context of the radical changes in world capitalism over the past half

a century and of the current escalation of geopolitical conflict. Politically, I critiqued a self-declared “anti-imperialist” left that readily condemns capitalist exploitation and repression around the world when it is practiced by the United States and other Western powers or governments they support, yet turns a blind eye to, or even defends repressive, authoritarian, and dictatorial states simply because these states face hostility from, or are in competition with, Washington. This “anti-imperialist” left insists that there is one single enemy, the United States and its allies, in a Manichean tale of “the West and the rest” that has substituted a realist for a Marxist political and theoretical framework. As socialists we cannot oppose imperialism while legitimating capitalist exploitation and repression in the name of fighting a U. S. empire.

I will try to further within the space constraints here the argument put forward in my summer 2023 essays. We need, I maintain, a profound rethinking of imperialism and anti-imperialism. I am by no means convinced that we should retain the term, if not the concept, of imperialism in place of coming up with new ways to conceive and speak of transnational exploitation and political and military interventions of states in relation to that exploitation. The critique of imperialism and anti-imperialism must start from an analysis of the transformations that world capitalism has undergone through capitalist globalization. Global capitalism is a new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of world capitalism characterized by the rise of truly transnational capital, the integration or re-integration of every country, often violently, into a globally integrated system of production, finance, and services, and an unprecedented concentration and centralization of capital on a world scale in transnational capital (see, *inter alia*, Robinson, 2004; 2008; 2014; 2018). The leading fractions among local capitalists from around the world have been swept up into these globalized circuits of accumulation. There are now powerful contingents of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) in most countries of the world. It is through this globally-integrated production, financial, and service system that global capital controls resources and exploits global labor. While the TCC as the hegemonic fraction of capital on a world scale is not tethered to territory and while it has to rely on and also contend with national states, it does not identify with any one nation-state.

Colonialism and imperialism are the historical processes through which capitalism expanded outward and conquered the world over the past five centuries. Capitalism is by its very nature expansionary. A state of *stasis* is a state of crisis. Its agents must constantly enlarge the frontiers of accumulation, impose the value form on more and more spaces, seize new resources, exploit fresh supplies of labor. In this sense, imperialism refers to an economic (class) relationship facilitated by extra-economic political, military, and ideological processes. Lenin and his generation of Marxists analyzed world capitalism in an earlier moment of its evolution. They advanced not a nation-state but a *class-based* theory of imperialism. They analyzed the rise of powerful national capitalist monopolies, the competition among these to seize new markets overseas for over-accumulated capital and new sources of labor and raw materials, and conflict and rivalry among these national capitalist classes through their respective states. Their analysis was not wrong; it is outdated. As capital expanded out violently from its original Western heartland it plundered and exploited the colonial regions and extracted out of them surplus value that was accumulated in metropolitan centers. But these relations of appropriation and exploitation, and the subsequent flows of surplus value, now take place all over the world and do not resemble the earlier structure in which Western colonial capital simply syphoned out surplus value from the colonies and deposited it back in colonial coffers.

We need to theorize capitalist expansion and the worldwide class relations of exploitation in new ways; in particular, we need to ask who is doing the exploitation and who is being exploited? If imperialism refers to the appropriation of resources and the exploitation of labor by capital across national borders and the flow of the surplus value therein extracted back across borders then there is no doubt that such imperialism now occurs all over the world, in multiple directions, and there are numerous imperialist states, including in the former Third World. This proposition is problematic — not, however, because it implicates so-called “oppressed nations” in the former Third World in the global webs of imperialist exploitation, but because, to begin with, it frames imperialism in terms of oppressed and oppressor (or imperialist) nations. A nation cannot exploit another nation. This is an utter reification. Classes exploit and are exploited. Imperialism has always been a *violent class relation* not between countries but between global

capital and global labor, a *class project* mediated, however, through a world economy politically divided into national jurisdictions and by the uneven accumulation of capital on a world scale. Our challenge is how to understand this relationship in the contemporary era of globalized capitalism, that is, the relationship of transnational capital and class to the state, and specifically to the nation-state.

With the rise of powerful contingents of the TCC in many countries of the former Third World, transnational capitalists from so-called “oppressed nations” appropriate resources and exploit labor around the world. As I noted in my summer 2023 essays, this transnational capital is not just “Northern” or “Triad” capital. It includes the rise of powerful transnational corporate and financial conglomerates from the formerly colonized countries that now export their capital around the world in the same way as European imperial powers did in Lenin’s day.¹ The Brazilian-based transnational conglomerate, Vale, one of the world’s largest integrated mining companies, ceased being a “Brazilian” company in the twenty-first century (Aguilar, 2023). It has operations on every continent and exploits tens of thousands of workers in the traditional North American and European core. But there are countless other examples. The Indian-based Tata conglomerate is the single largest manufacturing employer (and therefore capitalist exploiter of labor) in the United Kingdom (*The Economist*, 2011). Chinese-based corporations operate in every continent, including throughout North America and Europe, where they exploit U. S. and European workers. Mexican-based transnationals invest throughout Latin and North America and beyond, exploiting workers of all nationalities. Gulf-based capitalists export capital around the world. Moreover, when we set about to analyze the structure of global capital we find an expanding complex of interlocked networks that crisscross the world and a very high degree of transnational integration, especially through the circuits of global finance.

But this frame remains problematic. It leads to the conclusion that China, Brazil, India, and so on, are now imperialist powers, each with more or less power and exploitation in the international order in a hierarchy of imperialists and the relationships among them. Were we

1 Already in 2015, the 50 largest companies from “emerging markets” increased from 19 to 40 percent the portion of their revenue from overseas activity while more than half of all corporate revenue growth from 2015–2025 was expected to come from these companies (McKinsey, 2015, pp. 10, 13).

to be systematic with such an approach we would have to conclude that few countries are not imperialist. In recent years the central African nation of Rwanda has sent troops to the Central African Republic and Mozambique, and will likely deploy more to Benin and elsewhere, to fight local insurgencies. Financed but only in part by the European Union, these troops have opened up space for Rwandan corporations to seize local mining, land, and industrial concessions. As *The Economist* (2023) reports: “These deployments appear to serve two broad aims: to make money and to influence people. [The] payback appears to be through Rwandan firms getting rights to mine minerals. [Rwandan president] Mr. Kagame acknowledged as much, saying that since Mozambique and the Central African Republic had no money, they had agreed to ‘find another way’ to compensate Rwanda. A number of Rwandan companies have piled into both countries. Many of them are linked to Crystal Ventures, a sprawling holding company that is the investment arm of Rwanda’s ruling party. Wherever the army goes, Crystal Venture follows.” The article goes on to note that more than 100 Rwandan companies — from agribusiness and mining to consumer goods and retail — are registered in the Central African Republic and are also making deals in Mozambique.²

It is clear that we need to replace the notion of imperialism as a relationship among countries in favor of an analysis that focuses on the webs of transnational class exploitation mediated through states. My detractors will raise at least two objections: the center-periphery structure of world capitalism and the massively outsized role of U. S. control and interventionism around the world. On the first, there remains an international division of labor and a center-peripheral structure of transnational class relations forged through the centuries of colonialism and imperialism. While this structure has been

2 Lepidi (2023) notes that the Rwandan government was also defending the interests of the TotalEnergies, an energy giant from the former colonial power, France. But the notion that the Rwandan government is merely a “client state” of France is untenable given that Rwandan capitalists themselves are seizing resources, exploiting labor, and extracting surplus for their own profit-making in multiple African countries. Neither does the notion of “subimperialism” offer a satisfactory framework of analysis. For further details, see also International Crisis Group (2023), which notes that Rwandan investors have business operations throughout Central Africa, and that the BRICS countries have opened “the bloc’s central African office in Bangui and announced various investment projects.” Moreover, there is competition with Russia’s Wagner group. Clearly there are geopolitical dimensions to this transnational movement of transnational capital that I cannot explain here.

experiencing substantial transformations that I cannot address here,³ it remains true that labor is more intensely exploited in the former Third World and the absolute savagery of capital more fully on display. Most on the left see the greater intensity of exploitation, or super-exploitation, to follow Marini, as something that benefits only capitalists from core countries, or worse still, they see it has something that benefits nations.

Yet the relationship of the core-periphery structure of the world economy to global capitalism cannot be understood in terms that correspond to earlier centuries, and especially not in terms of some bourgeoisie in peripheral regions oppressed by metropolitan capital and prepared to join class alliances with workers and peasants of the countries where they (but not necessarily their capital) reside. The toiling masses of Africa are superexploited by transnational capital. But who is doing this exploitation is not an “oppressor nation” and not necessarily Western-based capital but transnational capitalists from around the world, including by Rwandan state and private capitalists. Chinese private and state corporations control most of the production of cobalt in the Congo, in the process brutally exploiting Congolese miners and plundering the country. That cobalt goes back to industrial circuits in Asia where iPhones and other electronic equipment are manufactured by transnational capital and marketed around the world. And when we study the actual structure of ownership of Apple, to take the case of iPhones, we find that transnational capitalists and financial holding companies from around the world are invested in the company (Robinson, 2022).

Rwanda’s political-military role in central Africa brings home the relationship between political-military intervention and economic exploitation: where Rwandan troops go they open up space for Rwandan capitalists. It may be absurd to characterize Rwanda as an “imperialist nation.” Yet it is doing exactly what much on the left would describe as imperialism, which underscores just how outdated is much of the left’s conception of imperialism. How, then, is transnational capitalist exploitation possible? How can we understand the political and military processes that facilitate these worldwide relations of exploitation? Capital cannot reproduce or expand without the state.

3 A global, rather than international, division of labor is a more useful conception. Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere, center and periphery cannot be conceived as territory. See, *inter alia*, Robinson (2002; 2014).

That has been true throughout the whole history of world capitalism and remains true today. In this age of globalization the world has to be pried open to transnational capital and then kept open to it. All threats to its freedom to exploit and accumulate have to be suppressed. This effort requires political, military, and economic instruments, ranging from *coups d'état* and military interventions, to economic sanctions, structural adjustment programs, free trade agreements, the mechanisms of debt and financial leverage, lawfare, and so on.

The U. S. state has played the preponderant role to date in this process of capitalist globalization, in making the world available to and safe for transnational capital. It continues to act as a battering ram to force open space for capital to accumulate and as a wrecking ball to smash apart any resistance to it. Many on the left would characterize this U. S. interventionism around the world as intended to advance the interests of "U. S. capital," or of "U. S. interests" in competition against or alliance with other powers. Phrases such as "national interests" (as in "defending U. S. interests") are meaningless and have no place in Marxist analysis. What we really mean to ask is, what are the *class interests* behind what the U. S. state does around the world? The U. S. state has served over the past half century of capitalist globalization as the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of global capitalism through which the mass of the world's poor and working peoples have been contained and controlled, the world is further pried open for transnational corporate plunder, and states perceived as threatening the unfettered accumulation of capital are attacked. However, as I have shown elsewhere, rather than sealing off intervened regions to capitalists from other countries U. S. interventions have *opened them up* to transnational capital regardless of national origin.

The United States props up repressive governments in Latin America as does France in Africa, whereas in these same countries Chinese or other transnational investors exploit labor but do not intervene politically or militarily to prop up repressive states. What is the relationship here between Western intervention and Chinese capitalist exploitation? As socialists we must oppose not just political and military intervention but also the class exploitation that it makes possible. Today, capitalists based in China or Brazil or India, for instance, do not need to exert military aggression or to colonize in order to freely export their capital and exploit labor and resources around the world. That was historically accomplished by Western

colonialism and imperialism. There is nothing intrinsically — as distinct from historically — Western about imperialism. It historically had a Western identity because capitalism was born in the West and expanded out from there.

But things are now changing rapidly. Global capitalism is mired in a structural crisis of over-accumulation, a political crisis of state legitimacy, capitalist hegemony and international conflict, and an environmental crisis of the planetary ecosystem. We are moving towards a general crisis of capitalist rule, a period of worldwide instability and chaos that drives geopolitical confrontation and the recklessness of a declining hegemonic power. The crisis sharpens the contradiction between a globally integrated economy and a nation-state-based system of political authority and capitalist reproduction. While transnational capital pursues endless worldwide accumulation the capitalist states that facilitate this accumulation within their respective territories have a contradictory mandate. They must also achieve legitimacy and reproduce the national social formation of the countries over which they rule, keep the domestic order from fracturing, sustain growth, exercise social control, and compete with other states to attract transnationally mobile capital. Unlike global capitalists, state and political elites reproduce their status within the nation-state and its relation to other states and the international system. States and state elites, in order to reproduce themselves, must reproduce transnational capital. By reproducing the conditions for capital accumulation capitalist states generate problems that they must then attempt to resolve and that may place them in conflict with one another and with transnational capital. While states come under pressure from capital to serve its accumulation imperative they also come under pressure from working and popular classes, especially as class struggle and political conflict heat up as we are now seeing.

The structure of global capital and the relationship within that structure between transnational capital and local, national, and regional fractions is a matter of empirical research, as is the possibility that state capital, in which state managers and capitalists overlap, may be pulled into conflicting directions. The economic and the political are two moments in a larger totality. They form a contradictory unity. Moreover, to say that transnational capital is not tethered to *territory* is not to say that it is not tethered to *national states*, not as geographic spaces but as centers of power. The extent to which

clusters of transnational capital may retain special relationships with the nation-states from whose cocoon they sprung is as well a matter of empirical research. But we do not want to confuse national capital that operates outside of national borders with transnational capital. I have been forced by space constraints here to simplify, especially with regard to complex levels of mediation. No historic process is static; all processes are subject to reversals that do not return us to the *status quo ante* but to a new set of circumstances. As the global capitalist crisis intensifies it is pushing states towards nationalism, populism, and protectionism, whether this refers to U. S. protectionism or the Chinese state's crackdown on tech billionaires.

The TCC faces mounting pressure to open up new outlets for over-accumulated capital that push clusters of transnational capital towards hyper-competition over shrinking shares of surplus value. But there is no evidence that these pressures are what drive state rivalries and geopolitical conflict. The TCC has opposed protectionism and state interference in accumulation strategies. Capital's rationale for going global was to escape national economic, techno-industrial, and social constraints on the rate of profit and it has no intention of returning to the confines of the nation-state. The U. S. and the Chinese states have been taking measures to undercut transnational capital integration and to place controls on the TCC against its wishes. The US Chamber of Commerce has opposed US tariffs, whether under Obama, Trump, or Biden, and other restrictions of the freedom of transnational capital. The TCC wants access to the whole world without state interference. The Biden administration has restricted investments in Chinese entities involved in semiconductors, microelectronics, and artificial intelligence systems. But U. S.-based tech transnationals do not support these policies. Nvidia, Intel and Qualcomm, three of the world's largest chip makers, have opposed the White House restrictions (Tripp, McCabe, and Swanson, 2023). Elon Musk, Tim Cook, and Bill Gates have been among a flood of high-profile business executives who have visited China in recent months to discuss their expanded presence there (Lili, 2023).

We are moving into a multipolar or polycentric world polity within a single integrated global economy exhibiting several centers of intense transnational accumulation such as the North American free trade bloc, the European Union, and a Sino-centric Asian economic region, each interlocked with one another. As I argued in my summer 2023 essays,

the emerging global capitalist pluralism may offer greater maneuvering room for popular struggles around the world, but a politically multipolar world does not mean that emerging poles of global capitalism are any less exploitative or oppressive than the established centers. I am not satisfied with attributing escalating international conflict simply to “inter-imperialist rivalry” without further clarity as to how we understand imperialism and the relationship between transnational capital and the state in this third decade of the twenty-first century. The U. S. state remains at this time the greatest threat to the world’s people, the command center of the carnage that is global capitalism. But in opposing U. S. interventionism socialists must not excuse capitalist exploitation and state repression in other countries around the world or fail to support those resisting such exploitation and repression. As the crisis intensifies a socialist politics demands an uncompromising proletarian internationalism, or transnationalism, one that does not support one geopolitical bloc over another in place of supporting working and popular class struggles in each country and bloc.

WILLIAM I. ROBINSON

Department of Sociology
University of California at Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93016
w.i.robinson1@gmail.com

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DID SOMEONE MENTION SOCIALISM?

Given the nature of Marxist teleology, it ought to be impossible for socialists to disagree with the central argument Robinson makes: that behind much anti-imperialism lies an unchallenged nationalist politics, which in the present age of transnational capital and class hides accumulation by and within non-imperialist countries; consequently, opposition to imperialism as oppressor of less powerful nations by more powerful ones tends to miss the full extent of capitalist development and class divisions operating across all globalized contexts. In one sense, it is difficult to believe that we are still having this debate, since its arguments,

politics, and outcomes are issues that have a long history on the left. In another sense, however, it is perhaps still important to remind ourselves of the issues raised, not least in the current ideological climate where resurgent nationalisms and populisms are once again on the march. Now, more than ever, the question posed is which immediate political objective should leftists support: yet more nationalism, on the grounds that the main enemy is an external imperialism, and hence non-metropolitan capitalism is still a progressive force, or socialism?

The reactionary and non-progressive aspects of nationalism in the recent past and currently are hard to disguise. Such characteristics underwrite attempts by wealthy regions (Lombardy, Catalonia) inside European countries to separate from the wider national context by claiming they are culturally/nationally other, and always have been. The same kind of argument was used by the apartheid South African state but in reverse form, separating wealthy/white areas from the Bantustans, designated culturally “other” where impoverished blacks were confined.⁴ Similarly, when in late 19th century Austria capitalists replaced unionized German workers with cheaper Czech migrants, leftist parties advocated splitting worker institutions, organization, and politics along ethnic/national lines, thereby laying the ground for the emergence and consolidation of the far right in Austria and Germany.⁵

Historically, the difficulty with a nation-centric discourse about imperialism is the kind of political economic model which it trails in its wake: namely, that as capitalism is a system still largely confined to metropolitan contexts (US, Europe), the nation invoking anti-imperialism has yet to experience such a transition. Consequently, the next step is a political alliance composed of a national bourgeoisie (“progressive”), workers, and peasants against foreign capital and for a bourgeois democratic stage in which a benign/non-foreign accumulation will establish itself in the nation concerned.⁶ This is a

4 Perversely, this separate development policy of the apartheid state was justified in self-serving terms as to the advantage of black communities, a way of protecting the latter by providing them with their own physical space where ‘authentic’ cultural traditions/practices and local institutions could flourish unhindered.

5 See Whiteside (1962, 1975).

6 This sort of argument — criticized by me elsewhere (Brass, 2018b; 2021; 2022) — can still be found, for example, in Patnaik and Patnaik (2017), for whom India has yet to become capitalist, and for whom the main enemy continues to be an external Britain. Claims about the continuation of British imperialism/colonialism where present-day India is concerned, together with the view that it is just such a relationship which is holding back its economic growth, are misplaced. Not only are large amounts of British industry now owned/controlled

very old argument, encountered most recently in the 1960s development decade, when economic growth in newly independent Third World countries required expropriating foreign owners of key economic resources (land, mines) on which then to build an authentically national accumulation project. It was, in short, the semi-feudal thesis, much criticized by Marxists then and since. Initially postponed, socialism eventually vanishes altogether from this political agenda.

Frequently underestimated or ignored is the contribution by academics to this nationalist upsurge.⁷ Why we are still having this conversation is due in part to the shifts in the dominant theoretical paradigm about Third World development that accompanied the rise of neoliberalism. Mimicking the logic of capitalism, entry into academic posts of leftists from the 1960s onwards, and consequently Marxism as a topic of study, licensed a process of competition/recognition within universities that quickly became a plethora of reinterpretation. The latter entailed adding to Marxism concepts and theory that were non- or even anti-Marxist, leading inevitably to its dilution and depoliticization. Rather than the disempowerment of class, and its political resolution in the form of struggle for a revolutionary transition to socialism, the desirable objective quickly became empowerment or re-empowerment of non-class identities, to be achieved without necessarily transcending the capitalist system itself. This underlined the extent of ideological overlap between neoliberal economic theory and postmodern cultural turn (free markets, free choice of identity).

By the 1980s, therefore, the focus of the social sciences and the humanities more generally was changing dramatically; away from the materialist framework of Marxism, deemed inappropriate for an understanding of processes, issues, and populations outside Europe, and towards the “new” populist postmodernism, the focus of which was on the culturally empowering nature of identity politics. The latter approach was — and is — strongly antagonistic towards Marxist political economy, dismissed by postmodernists along with its conceptual apparatus of socialism/materialism/class as just one more kind of

by Indian capital, therefore, but the extent of wealth generated within India by Indians themselves underlines the well-established nature of an indigenous capitalist class. Between 2020 and 2021 the number of Indian millionaires increased from 689,000 to 796,000, while those in the sub-continent with a net worth of 100,000 U. S. dollars numbered 17 million (Financial Times, 2023).

7 For details, see Brass (2018a; 2020; 2023).

Eurocentric/Enlightenment “foundationalism.”⁸ Postmodern hostility expressed towards all things Marxist involves a twofold process: a denial of its historiography and conceptual apparatus is accompanied by an insistence on their replacement — epistemologically and politically — by a populist approach together with its privileging of peasant, ethnic, and national “otherness.” Marxism is declared irredeemably tainted by a historical deprivileging of these same non-class identities that many postmodernists essentialize, in effect recuperating and proclaiming as empowering all the categories, processes, and identities criticized hitherto by leftist political economy.

Undermining worker solidarity, and thus also “from below” organization based on class, populism has always been — and remains — one of the most effective “from above” forms of struggle waged by capital. Where accumulation generates and feeds off an industrial reserve army that is now global in scope, the combination of disempowered Marxism and empowered populism is ominous. Just as some leftists in academia and elsewhere replaced core beliefs (socialism, class) with postmodern notions of non-class identity as innate/empowering, so the far right has in turn moved onto the vacated political ground, incorporating plebeian identity into its own ideology. To the postmodern argument emphasizing the cultural identity of the migrant-as-“other”-nationality, therefore, the far right counterposes an argument similarly privileging cultural identity, only this time the nationality of the non-migrant worker (= American, British selfhood).

Although the focus of Robinson is on imperialism, and whether its continuing role in generating economic development is progressive, the issue is also and inevitably about something else: the political shape of the future. What it confirms is that a long-standing debate on the left, about the limits to nationalism, to bourgeois democracy, and ultimately to capitalism itself, is still relevant. This discussion, centrally, has been and is still on the issue of when, finally, Marxists can and should move to replace these combined systemic forms by putting socialism on the political agenda, and organizing/mobilizing to achieve this particular objective. If one takes socialism out of the

8 See, for example, Escobar (1995), whose postmodern approach rejects development as an inappropriate foundational/Eurocentric model imposed by Marxists on rural populations of the Third World, a view shared both by the subaltern studies project associated with the work of Guha (1982-89) and by the “everyday forms of resistance” framework of Scott (1985, 2012).

equation, what remains is an opposition to capitalism that quickly arrives at the conservative position occupied historically by populists. The backward-looking ideology of the latter combines an aggressive nationalism with the return to and restoration of a “nicer” capitalism, not a transcendence of the system in question, and certainly nothing along the radical lines of a transition to socialism.

Accordingly, a long-term result of on the one hand supporting bourgeois democracy, accumulation, and nationalism, and on the other of demoting both the importance of struggle by workers to transcend capitalism and establish socialism, has been that in periods of economic crisis, when workers desire radical political solutions to their predicament, far-right populists colonize the political space that leftism has ceased to occupy. Insofar as it privileges cultural identity as empowering, current populism feeds off *laissez-faire* accumulation where economic crisis — generating both an expanding industrial reserve army of migrant labor and more intense competition, between capitalists themselves and between workers seeking employment — results in political crisis. In the absence of a radical leftist discourse advocating a break with capitalism and a socialist transition, therefore, workers are encouraged by populists to experience labor market competition as an effect of non-class identity. Currently and historically, evidence suggests that in these circumstances a radical politics remains on the agenda, but with the difference that working class support can be transferred instead to right-wing populist movements offering empowerment on the basis of nationalism and/or ethnicity. Where this eventually leads, no Marxist should need reminding.

TOM BRASS

Richmond-upon-Thames
Surrey TW10 7XT
United Kingdom
tombrass@btinternet.com

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THE IMPERIALIST SYSTEM IS STILL WITH US

I welcome and heartily endorse the political conclusion that Bill Robinson draws, not just in his article for this symposium but in other recent pieces, namely:

The U. S. state remains at this time the greatest threat to the world’s people, the command center of the carnage that is global capitalism. But in opposing U. S. interventionism socialists must not excuse capitalist exploitation and state repression in other countries around the world or fail to support those resisting such exploitation and repression.

The global situation over the past two decades has been marked by three features: (1) U. S. policymakers’ exercise of capabilities still greatly superior to those of other states for increasingly cruel and destructive purposes; (2) outside the armed insurgencies mounted to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the relative weakness of popular resistance to U. S. domination; and (3) the increasing contestation of U. S. global

hegemony by geopolitical rivals, above all China and Russia. This situation may be beginning to change thanks to the huge worldwide solidarity movement for Palestine that has developed since Israel launched its genocidal war in Gaza, but it has largely defined the political horizons, in the North at least, since the decline of the popular opposition to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

The result has been a recrudescence on the left of what used to be called “campism” during the Cold War. Then it referred to the tendency of leftists, even if they weren’t members of a Communist party, to identify the Soviet bloc as the force for progress in what Isaac Deutscher called the “Great Contest” between East and West (Deutscher, 1961). This became harder to sustain, at least on the Western left, as Moscow’s imperialist interventions — Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan — accumulated, but it retained a strong hold in the global South till the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Campism today often retains some of the ideological baggage of the Cold War era — with Russia under Vladimir Putin seen as the underdog facing Washington’s aggressive expansion of NATO eastwards and China’s economic ascent unfolding under the leadership of the Communist Party that led the 1949 Revolution. But it is also a confession of weakness, a reliance on rival states to resist the arrogance of U. S. power rather than on working-class struggle from below, together with the rest of the exploited and oppressed.

I also agree, though with more qualifications, with Robinson’s call for “a profound rethinking of imperialism and anti-imperialism.” He is right in the sense that campism today is often justified by an appeal to a bastardized version of the Marxist theory of imperialism, one that reduces imperialism to a relationship among states, and especially to the domination of one state — the United States — over all the rest. This can lead to a blindness to the crimes of its rivals — for example, of Russia in brutally crushing the Chechen national movement and wantonly invading Ukraine in February 2022. Moreover, as Robinson emphasizes, “Lenin and his generation of Marxists . . . advanced not a nation-state but a *class-based* theory of imperialism.” Campism encourages a failure to acknowledge the extent to which Washington’s rivals advance the interests of the capitalist classes that form their social base at the expense of workers and other exploited classes or to notice the predatory behavior of much weaker states within their regions (Robinson gives the example of Rwanda, but there are plenty more).

So far so good. But Robinson goes on to argue that the analysis developed by Lenin and the other classical Marxist theorists of imperialism “was not wrong; it is outdated,” and must be replaced by the theory of transnational capitalism he has developed (notably in Robinson, 2004). This theory, along with the somewhat related idea developed by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri of contemporary capitalism as Empire, a “transnational network power” (Hardt and Negri, 2000), has occasioned much debate among Marxists. Rather than dive back into this debate (see Callinicos, 2001 and my contributions to Anievas, 2010), I’d like to focus on what is living and what is dead in the classical Marxist theory of imperialism.

Let me sum up what’s living: capitalist imperialism is a global system of domination and competition. More specifically: (1) Luxemburg and Lenin both understand imperialism as not an accident, or optional policy, but a structural consequence of the process of capital accumulation. Luxemburg relies on her critique of Marx’s reproduction schemes to arrive at this conclusion. Lenin critically adopts Hilferding’s theory of finance capital, according to which the growing concentration of economic power — Lenin indeed says “in its economic essence imperialism is monopoly capitalism” (Lenin, 1964–68, XXII, 298) — gives rise to the emergence of the banks, in coordination with nation-states, as dominant over industrial capital. (2) These transformations lead to what David Harvey and I have conceptualized in parallel though independent ways as the intersection of economic and geopolitical competition that becomes visible at the end of the 19th century (Harvey 2003, Callinicos 2009). Capitals, increasingly operating transnationally, rely on ‘their’ states to promote their interests; correlatively, state managers have an interest in ensuring that these capitals continue to prosper and provide the weapons systems and other resources needed to support their military capabilities. (3) There is therefore what Bukharin called a contradiction between the internationalization of capital, reflected, for example, in the Victorian expansion of world trade and investment, or in the globalization era at the end of the 20th century, and what he described as state capitalism, the growing interdependence of nation-states and private firms (Bukharin, 1929, ch. VIII). (4) Finally, imperialism is caught up in a process of uneven and combined development that constantly destabilizes the relations between states.⁹ This is a crucial

9 I prefer Trotsky’s more comprehensive formulation — uneven and combined development. Nevertheless, the use Lenin makes of his own concept of uneven development is one of his main contributions to the theory of imperialism.

innovation by Lenin, who argues that the economically driven ascent and decline of imperial powers makes impossible Kautsky's vision of "ultra-imperialism," a pacific global cartel.

This conception of specifically capitalist imperialism helps us to see why Robinson is right to criticize campism. Imperialism cannot be understood here in transhistorical terms as the domination of a powerful extractive state over its periphery — China, Persia, Rome, the Ottomans, the Mughals, in precapitalist times. It is a *system* of rivalry among capitalist powers striving for regional or global domination. This is one of the main points Lenin takes from J. A. Hobson, whose book on imperialism he seems to prefer to the work of fellow Marxists such as Hilferding and Kautsky. He praises "the *social-liberal* Hobson, who *more correctly* [than Kautsky] takes into account two 'historically concrete' . . . features of modern imperialism: (1) the competition between *several* imperialisms, and (2) the predominance of the financier over the merchant" (Lenin, 1964–68, XXII, 267). Imperialism exists only in the plural, as a struggle for domination among capitalist powers. This is why Lenin emphasizes that the First World War is an *inter-imperialist* struggle among competing predators. This understanding is of political importance because it challenges any attempt to use the evils practised by one belligerent — Prussian militarism, English piracy, Russian absolutism — as a reason for supporting its opponents. Seeing imperialism as a system grounds anti-imperialism in internationalist class politics, directed against the sources of imperialist war in the capitalism system itself.

What's dead in the classical theory of imperialism? Chiefly the specifically economic arguments used to support it, which suffered from serious analytic weaknesses from the start. Luxemburg's claim that imperialism is driven by the economic need to find non-capitalist consumers has been rejected by her fellow Marxist economists ever since the publication of *The Accumulation of Capital* in 1913. Lenin's version was overreliant on two mutually inconsistent conceptions of finance in Hilferding and Hobson and lacked an adequate theory of crises, as did most of the other Marxists of his generation (Arrighi, 1978; Callinicos, 2018). But the conception of imperialism outlined above can be reinforced by incorporation into a more robust theory of accumulation and crises and by a historicization that distinguishes between different phases of imperialism — the apogee of colonial empire (1870–1945) when the classical theory was formulated, the

Cold War era, and the period since 1989 when the US has struggled to entrench and globalize its hegemony (Callinicos, 2009; 2023; Harvey, 2003).

Does capitalist imperialism as presented above continue to exist? In the era of neoliberal euphoria after the fall of the Soviet Union it seemed plausible to deny this, and a vast literature developed seeking to demonstrate, at different levels of sophistication, that the economic globalization of 1979–2008 — that is, from the neoliberal turn pioneered by Thatcher and Volcker to the financial crash — represented capital’s transcendence of the nation-state. But this is much harder to defend now. Robinson is right to highlight the surge in global economic integration over the past generation. But he struggles with the reality that, since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–9, capitals have become increasingly reliant on a new burst of state interventionism in a context of intensifying geopolitical competition. This started with the bank bailouts but developed much further with the emergence of what Jens van t’ Klooster calls “technocratic Keynesianism” — especially the quantitative easing and ultra-low interest rates pursued by central banks in response to first the GFC and then the pandemic, until the inflationary upsurge of 2022–3 (van t’Klooster, 2021).

The central banks have now generally shifted from these policies, returning to the neoliberal copybook by forcing up interest rates to reduce employment and inflation. But the Trump and Biden administrations have been marked by a deepening of state interventionism. While low interest rates favoured capitals generally wherever they are based, under Biden we’ve seen a concerted effort to rebuild the competitiveness of US capitalism and to hamper the technological upgrading of the Chinese economy, with Beijing responding symmetrically and the European Union as ever scrambling to catch up. In other words, states aren’t shoring up ‘transnational capitalism’ in general, but supporting the capitals particularly associated with them and based in their territory even if they operate globally as they enhance their military capabilities.

We are thus confronted with a situation where, if the United States and China did go to war over Taiwan, the results would certainly include the destruction of Taiwan Superconductor Manufacturing Company’s foundries, which produce most of the world’s advanced computer chips. Robinson might protest that this would represent

an economically irrational reversal of globalization. I would prefer to say that the contradiction that Bukharin highlighted over a hundred years ago between the globalization of capital and the mutual interpenetration of nation-states and private firms continues to operate. I remain in full solidarity with Robinson's critique of campism, but we still need the Marxist theory of imperialism to make sense of the increasingly dangerous world in which we live.

ALEX CALLINICOS

King's College London
 Strand
 London
 WC2R 2LS
 United Kingdom
 alex.callinicos@kcl.ac.uk
 Tel. +44 (0)7703 358 909

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THE UNINTENDED AND UNFORTUNATE CONSEQUENCES OF ROBINSON'S "MANICHEAN" LABEL

The basic problem with William Robinson's essay on imperialism and anti-imperialism, along with his three other cited 2023 articles, is that it skirts key issues facing international solidarity movements and, in some ways, lacks clarity. Robinson inveighs against those who focus singularly on the struggle against U. S. imperialism while they "turn a blind eye to . . . repressive, authoritarian, and dictatorial states simply because these states face hostility from . . . Washington." Yet Robinson in his various criticisms of the so-called "Manichean" anti-imperialist left is in fact referring to a relatively small number of leftists even though he uses phrases such as "much of the left," and "many on the left."¹⁰ Indeed, it is strange that an essay like this which is a broadside against a segment of the left on such basic issues doesn't make specific reference to any leftist or leftist organization by name. Particularly concerning is that other analysts, from different positions on the political spectrum, have invoked the same "Manichean left" term to attack Noam Chomsky, among other honest and principled leftists, for allegedly dividing the world into good and bad, with the United States in the latter category (Bérubé, 2009, 41–95; Horowitz, 2001; 2024, 8).

The real issue which the essay fails to address is whether the left should prioritize the struggle against U. S. imperialism. Robinson recognizes the brutality of U. S. imperialist actions and indeed in other published works has provided valuable empirical information to that effect (see, for instance, Robinson, 2020, 71–81, 118–126). Nevertheless, it can be inferred from his essay that Robinson does not subscribe to the position of prioritizing anti-U. S. imperialism. Robinson argues that in a fundamental sense global capital lies behind imperialist actions, regardless of whether orders originate from Washington politicians or Rwanda generals. This line of thinking runs counter to the thesis that the U. S. government represents the number one threat

10 For example, Robinson writes, "Most on the left see the greater intensity of exploitation, or superexploitation, to follow [Ruy Mauro] Marini, as something that benefits only capitalists from core countries." On what basis does Robinson make the statement that "most on the left" subscribe to this position? Indeed, Robinson's allegation that Marini followed this line of thinking is completely false as demonstrated by his writing on "subimperialism" and elsewhere (Latimer, 2022, 36–48). Certainly it is misleading to say that a significant number of leftists in the current period subscribe to the theory of the "national anti-imperialist bourgeoisie" in Southern nations, as Robinson implies (see, for instance, Sunkara, 2023).

to world peace. Moreover, Robinson questions the very usefulness of the term imperialism as a result of “the transformations that world capitalism has undergone through capitalist globalization.”

Robinson’s failure to specify who exactly on the left he is critiquing leaves open to question whether he considers those who prioritize the struggle against U. S. imperialism and deemphasize other spheres of conflict as belonging to the Manichean left. Elsewhere, Robinson provides specifics as to whom he is targeting. In his “The Unbearable Manicheanism of the ‘Anti-Imperialist’ Left” (which he references in this article), Robinson (2023b) singles out individuals who are in the forefront of the struggle against imperialism on a wide range of fronts. He cites as an example of “Unbearable Manicheanism” the anti-war group Code Pink, whom he falsely accuses of glorifying Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega for heading a “socialist government.” In fact, Code Pink has no position on the Ortega government. Its only position is opposition to the sanctions against Nicaragua, even while individual members of the organization are free to express more well-defined views on the subject. The lack of clarity in “Imperialism, Anti-Imperialism, and Transnational Class Exploitation” as to who belongs to the “Manichean left” category lends itself to unfair accusations of this type against fellow leftists.

Robinson’s use of the pejorative term “Manicheanism,” his claim that he is referring to “significant portions of the international left” (Robinson, 2022), and the harshness of his tone, as well as his failure to recognize the complexity of issues facing anti-imperialist activists, are disturbing. They are particularly alarming because of an inadvertent convergence between his essay and a narrative coming from those to his right designed to discredit the left. Just two days before Robinson’s “Unbearable Manicheanism” article appeared, the *New York Times* published an explosive piece of bogus journalism attacking Code Pink and other activists whom Robinson categorized as Manichean. The article characterized its subjects as foot soldiers “defending the Chinese government’s policies” and helping fulfill China’s “goal . . . to disguise propaganda as independent content” (Hvistendahi et al., 2023). Robinson has vehemently rejected this McCarthyite line of reasoning and indeed he himself has been a victim of it. But the harsh tone of his 2023 essays and failure to appreciate the knotty issues at stake unjustly discredit dedicated and courageous activists, which is exactly what the modern-day McCarthyites do.

I, like Robinson, disagree with the argument that U. S. citizens on the left should refrain from pointing to shortcomings of leftist governments of the global South because our duty is to defend those governments, not criticize them (a line of reasoning that has been used against my writing — Ellner, 2008, 173–174; Ellner, 2024). Unlike Robinson, however, I consider that argument to be within the realm of reason, albeit incorrect. Robinson, in contrast, views it as irrational, as has been repeatedly manifested in his recent writings: thus, for instance, the term “Manicheanism;” “the travesty of ‘anti-imperialism’” (Robinson, 2023a, 587); “socialism of fools”; and “the convoluted logic and retrograde politics of the ‘anti-imperialist’ left” (Robinson, 2023b). This same assumption of irrationality is put forward by the McCarthyites against anyone who criticizes the U. S. government, and on that basis allege or imply that leftists hate their own country.

Robinson’s writing on the Manichean left sidesteps an issue especially relevant for leaders and activists of international solidarity movements. Robinson condemns anti-imperialists who “turn a blind eye” to injustices committed by governments such as China and Brazil, which defy and confront Washington. Robinson’s dictum, however, places solidarity activists in an unwieldy position. China, Brazil, and Russia have proved to be all-important, reliable allies of Venezuela and Cuba in their struggle against U. S.-imposed international sanctions. I discussed this issue with Joe Emersberger, a long-time Venezuela solidarity activist who has written on the topic. Emersberger told me, “We’re always getting told that it’s our obligation to lash out at the Chinese just as we do at the U. S. If we did that, we’d be diverting attention from our real target which is U. S. imperialism” (interview, January 2, 2024). In short, there is a time and a place for critiques of this nature, but there is no ready formula for doing so.

Mao’s *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957) makes clear that words and style do matter, and distinctions must be made between enemies and those who are basically fighting for the same cause. Admittedly, drawing the line between allies, even those whose differences over strategy and tactics are profound, and non-allies is not always clear-cut. It tends to be easier to identify friends and foes when the issue involves support for or opposition to a war (as in Lenin’s writing during World War I and Mao’s *On Contradiction* in 1937) or in a war of maneuver (as in Lenin’s writing at the time of the Soviet revolution) as opposed to a war of position. My intention is not to revisit historic

debates on the left. It is enough to say that over the last approximately forty years, few leftists envision the emergence of a single party on the left for the current period, and thus the need for tolerance and support for pluralism has become more compelling than in the past, an imperative recognized by many on the left (Laibman, 2015, 7). These considerations lend themselves to a different type of language than Robinson's in his polemic against solidarity activists.

Over the last three decades, Robinson has published a number of empirically impressive works demonstrating the hegemonic status of the transnational capitalist class (TCC). Nevertheless, by centering his analysis on the injustices committed by the TCC against workers, Robinson loses sight of certain key differences and tensions among nations as well as geopolitical conflicts, thus blurring the broader political picture. This shortcoming leads him to underestimate the importance of the role of BRICS in challenging U. S. hegemony and defending the right of nations to self-determination.¹¹ He thus disparages the “‘anti-imperialists’ [for] cheer[ing] on the BRICS as a Southern challenge to global capitalism.” Although he recognizes that the organization “signal[s] the shift toward a more multipolar and balanced inter-state system within the global capitalist order,” he adds that “such a system remains part of a brutal, exploitative, global capitalist world in which BRICS capitalists and states are as much committed to control and exploitation of the global working class as are their Northern counterparts” (Robinson, 2023b).

The same tendency to underestimate or misrepresent geopolitical conflicts leads Robinson to condemn states basically on equal terms and suggest that even one like Rwanda may be considered imperialist. For Robinson, the imperialism of the U. S. is just quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from that of other nations. Thus, he argues that China, Russia, and the United States “are converging around remarkably similar ‘Great Power’ tropes, especially jingoistic — often ethnic — nationalism and nostalgia for a mythologized ‘glorious civilization’ that must now be recovered” (Robinson, 2023b). Nevertheless, the United States is not only quantitatively more imperialist (with 750 military bases outside of its 50 states) but qualitatively more as well. Thus,

11 The issue of the right of self-determination was the source of heated debate between Lenin (who defended the rights of ethnic groups in less developed regions to nationhood) and Rosa Luxemburg, among others. Although the context was different, the principle of self-determination for Southern nations has a bearing on the critique of Robinson's recent writing (Lenin, 1951).

for instance, while the State Department embraces the concept of the right to intervene, masked as the innocuous-sounding “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), and uses it to justify blatant interventionism, Moscow’s and Beijing’s official discourse favors the defense of national sovereignty and a multi-polar world, and their policies, particularly toward Latin America, reflect those principles. One aspect of its unique status is that at no time in history has a nation had so much military strength *vis-à-vis* all other nations in the world as has the United States since 1991. Another aspect is its defense of the dollar as a means of international exchange, an imperative that favors U. S. “national interests” (a term Robinson rejects) as opposed to those of the TCC.

The analysis that diffuses the blame from those most responsible for the implementation of policies that threaten world peace and necessary change detracts from the vigor and appeal of the anti-imperialist movement. Robinson recognizes the destructiveness of U. S. imperialism. But his attacks on those who prioritize resistance to it, and his overestimation of the process in which the transnational state (World Trade Organization, etc.) displaces the nation-state (Ellner, 2023, 41–43), reinforce the arguments of those on the left who pay but lip service, at best, to the danger of U. S. interventionism.

Robinson’s analysis of the TCC has important implications for leftist political strategy. The ascendancy of the TCC, for instance, weakens the state and its ability to make demands on capital, such as in taxation. This tendency limits the options available for reformist governments and strengthens the argument against working within the Democratic Party in the United States. In general, open debate on the left with regard to the political implications of the rise of the TCC serves as a corrective to dogmatic perspectives that fail to address transformations in the age of globalization. In this respect, Robinson’s research on the TCC is of much value. His theorizing on the TCC, however, should not detract from the need to focus on the struggle against U. S. imperialism, whose reach and aggressiveness, beyond a shadow of a doubt, are unmatched by those of any rival government.

STEVE ELLNER

Latin American Perspectives
P.O. Box 5703
Riverside, CA 92517-5703
sellner74@gmail.com

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IMPERIALISM: DON'T LET THE TREES KEEP YOU FROM SEEING THE FOREST

The following are a few telegraphic remarks on William I. Robinson's (2024) piece.¹²

Marx (2010a, 176–7, 582–3) pinned the logical, dialectical transition from simple commodity circulation (C–M–C) to capitalist circulation proper (M–C {LP + MP} ... P ... Cϕ –Mϕ) on the thesis that, between fundamentally unequal parties, the formal exchange of equivalents turns into exploitation. This historical materialist insight can be generalized: Exceptions aside, any *formal* relation of equality between *substantively* unequal parties imposes a hierarchical, exploitative relation.

Since colonial times, the *international* distribution of capital has been highly unequal. During most of capitalist history (at least since 1820), the rise in social inequality in the world, the result of polarizing tendencies *within* and *between* countries, was predominantly caused by an increase in the latter type. Even though this secular tendency may have reversed after peaking in 1980 (especially after 2000), the *international* (*versus* the domestic) share of global social inequality is still around one-third of the total (Chancel *et al.*, 2022). These are levels like those observed in the 1910s, when Hilferding, Luxemburg, Lenin, Bukharin, and others developed their views on imperialism.

Even without specifying its processes or “mechanisms,” the large, persistent polarization in cross-country capitalist development and the existence of capital as many individual capitals in reciprocal competition grant *prima facie* plausibility to the notion of *imperialist* exploitation, *i.e.*, the exploitation of most nations (the bulk of humanity) by a few richer ones.¹³ Imperialist exploitation should be our “null” (default) hypothesis when examining global capitalist society. To exhibit the material reality underpinning imperialism (preempting the objection of ideological bias in one's socio-historical characterization of particular societies), consider basic facts. The IMF estimates the 2009 and 2019 stocks of global capital at \$225 trillion and \$320

12 Huato (2023a) questions Robinson's (2023) arguments on anti-imperialism. Huato (2023b) argues the centrality of anti-imperialism in the struggle for socialism.

13 *Nation* is a reified “social object” and category. But so is *class*, the consequence of the historical alienation of labor. Both are social objects alienated from their producers. Contra Robinson, nations can and do exploit nations, as Marx, Engels, and Lenin acknowledged.

trillion, respectively.¹⁴ Table 1 shows the shares of the global capital stock held by the six countries topping the list:

While a country's share of the global capital stock offers a glimpse of its relative economic "size," its position in the international "balance of forces" also depends on its productivity. Table 2 shows the ratios of the share of global capital to the share of global population, a proxy for average productivity and standard of living for the six top countries listed. (The world's ratio benchmark is 1.)

By this measure, the six leading countries split into two distinctive groups. Japan, the United States, and Germany belong to an exclusive club: the imperialist core, the West, or the North. Russia, China, and India "ain't in it," let alone *most* other countries (with minuscule global capital shares). In per-capita terms, in 2009, the collective capital stock in Japan, the United States, and Germany was \$134 million *versus* \$15 million in Russia, China, and India: an 8.9 to 1 proportion. In 2019, it was \$145 million per capita *versus* \$32 million per capita, for a 4.5 to 1 proportion (IMF, 2023). In this decade, the gap narrowed to half

TABLE 1
Country Shares (%) of Global Capital Stock and Global Population

| Country | 2009 | | 2019 | |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|------------|
| | Capital | Population | Capital | Population |
| United States | 17.9 | 4.5 | 15 | 4 |
| China | 10.4 | 19.3 | 20 | 18 |
| Japan | 8.4 | 1.9 | 6 | 2 |
| Germany | 4.8 | 1.2 | 4 | 1 |
| India | 4.0 | 17.0 | 6 | 18 |
| Russia | 3.9 | 2.1 | 3 | 2 |
| <i>Subtotal</i> | <i>49.4</i> | <i>46.0</i> | <i>54</i> | <i>45</i> |

Source: IMF (2023). (The figures may be subject to rounding errors.)

14 These estimates are grossly understated. The IMF uses the "perpetual inventories method" to estimate the stocks of constant, fixed ("physical") capital. Instead of forward-looking market values, this method relies on investment flows at historical ("book") values. Changes in the conditions of production or use of productive inputs get reflected on market conditions, "shifting" their demands or supplies, causing episodic *value revolutions*, i.e., sudden capital de- or revalorizations. What determines the value of the commodities that constitute individual or social capital is not the average quantity of social labor time *spent* in producing them, but rather that *required* to reproduce them anew: a future quantity the market can only estimate by trial and error.

TABLE 2
Ratio of the Share of Global Capital to the Share of Global Population

| Country | 2009 | 2019 |
|---------------|------|------|
| Japan | 4.55 | 3.59 |
| United States | 4.02 | 3.52 |
| Germany | 4.03 | 3.38 |
| Russia | 1.90 | 1.66 |
| China | 0.54 | 1.10 |
| India | 0.24 | 0.35 |

Source: Author's calculations. (The figures may be subject to rounding errors.)

its previous level. Good news, but the gap remains wide, indicating a brutal degree of international inequality.¹⁵

Again, exploitation and class struggle flow from a global structure (imperialism) based on an asymmetric distribution of the productive forces under the rule of capital. This is the preponderant fact of today's global capitalist society. This structure constitutes a *totality*. Therefore, of necessity, the high productivity and wealth of the North is premised on the low productivity and poverty of the South. For this very reason, imperialism impedes the development of the South. The struggle for development is another name for the anti-imperialist struggle.

The decrease in international inequality in the last quarter of a century is connected to (mainly) four large shifts in the distribution of global capital: the productivity slowdown in the United States and the European Union, China's rapid industrialization, Russia's recovery after the catastrophic Soviet collapse, and India's economic expansion. The about-face in U. S. foreign policy toward China and Russia under the last three administrations is a reaction to these geoeconomic shifts. Robinson questions it, but the category of imperialism, conceived as an

15 Comparing the three leading countries in the South against those in the North preempts the objection that countries in the South (such as China, India, and Russia) may exploit even poorer countries. Independent producers and small businesses may be more abusive of their workers than larger businesses, but this does not invalidate the analysis of capitalist societies as divided between capitalists and workers. Similarly, the division of the world between imperialist nations and exploited ones is not useless. Of course, when one examines international relations in their concrete complexity, there are myriad in-between cases and contradictory phenomena, which should be appraised in their proper dimension and socio-historical context.

eminently *international* phenomenon (*i.e.*, involving relations among nation-states) cannot find a sharper historical validation.

In historical periods when the class struggle cools off, after decisive battles are resolved or when a relatively stable impasse is reached, ideas recur about the disappearance or irrelevance of class divisions altogether. When, under new conditions, the class struggle resumes, these ideas prove to be baseless. It would be unfair to compare Robinson's thesis to Fukushima's "End of History," Thatcher's "TINA," and other "illusions of the epoch" predicated on the apparent immutability of U. S.-led international order. But his claims that "imperialism now occurs all over the world, in multiple directions," that "there are numerous imperialist states, including in the former Third World," that "so-called 'oppressed nations' in the former Third World" are implicated "in the global webs of imperialist exploitation", and that it is "problematic" to frame "imperialism in terms of oppressed and oppressor (or imperialist) nations" — they are all questionable.

The material and economic *conditions* that underpin the division of the world between exploited and exploiting countries shift, and the shifts press on the legal and political "superstructures." There are historical cycles. Under a phase of the cycle, some of the symptomatic manifestations of imperialism may seem to disappear, *e.g.*, international tensions ease. After World War II and especially after the Soviet fall, the United States emerged as an undisputed hegemon. This fact and the ensuing neoliberal consensus may have given the impression that the states were being superseded by "transnational" capital. But, when the conditions that sustained U. S. hegemony declined, the states regained prominence.

At the relatively high level of abstraction at which Marx left his political economy, capital appears as a voracious self-expanding value devoid of nationality. Thus, by (abstract) definition, capital is a *transnational* social power, *i.e.*, it transcends its nation-state (and other barriers). At a high level of abstraction, one can postulate a human who transcends sex or gender, but that cannot mean that concrete humans exist as asexual or genderless beings. Capital has a compulsion to transcend barriers, but the barriers exist.

At his intellectual peak, Marx (2010b, 261) planned his study of "the system of bourgeois economy" to also include an analysis of "the State, foreign trade, and the world market." Progressing from the abstract to the concrete, the results of his prior examination of

capital, wage labor, and land ownership would be qualified or “transformed.” If the concrete juridical and political constitution of capital in the form of nation-states — engaged in trade, their totality forming a world capitalist market — did not require alteration of the results of his prior analysis, why bother?

The social basis for the existence of capital is generalized private ownership (commodity production) and inequality (mass poverty and dispossession of the direct producers on one pole and concentration of the “means of production and subsistence” in the other pole). The state is necessary for capital to acquire a legal and political complexion and become a stable and dominant social relation. The existence of a truly *trans*-national or *a*-national capitalist class (as opposed to a merely national, *inter*-national or *multi*-national one) would necessitate a transnational *state*.

The dynamics of today’s capitalist society cannot be adequately grasped solely by identifying its dominant mode of production. The main tendencies that flow from capitalist production — exploitation, class resistance, and inter-capitalist competition — do not appear in pure form on the surface of social life. They are refracted in and through the state superstructure. Exploitation, class struggle and competition take legal and political forms. They appear in the state domain as *policies*: tax codes, budgets, regulations, public indebtedness and currency emission, administrative edicts. The subordinate classes are not merely passive. The state is a concrete synthesis; while primarily dominated by the interests of capital, it crystallizes a relatively stable balance of class forces.

The international polarity of capital implies that large nations with superior productive power tend to throw their military, diplomatic, and ideological weight behind their economic, legal, political, and cultural interactions with less productive countries. Even the states that result from socialist-led workers’ revolutions have struggled to overcome this tendency, which is why full communism is necessary. All state policy is ultimately *economic* policy since any reshuffling of legal rights and responsibilities is ultimately a redistribution of legal claims (“assets”) and obligations (“liabilities”) over the productive force of society’s labor. All economic policy is ultimately *fiscal* policy. A particular fiscal policy (a taxing, borrowing, currency-issuing, spending, and regulatory regime) results from the class struggle waged by political and legal means — what Lenin referred to as the *political* class struggle, the fight for state power, to determine state policy.

Modern imperialism is associated with highly concentrated and centralized production and capital. It is different than its colonial precedent in that the mass and quality of the productive forces has increased. The *economic* forms of global integration in the reproduction process are more refined than ever: international production, management, control, and ownership. In particular, the legal or “financial” superstructure of ownership, grafted in the judiciary of nation-states, has mutated to facilitate M–C–M ϕ . This refinement is due to the more advanced technological basis of these activities today. Yet, they are still, basically, *trade* and *ownership sharing*. The mutations these economic forms have experienced in the last half a century do not in any manner override imperialist exploitation.

JULIO HUATO

c/o Science & Society
195 Montague Street Rm 1454
Brooklyn, NY 11201

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TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALIST CLASS THEORY: AN ASSESSMENT

Recent work by William Robinson (summarized here in Robinson, 2024) offers a unique opportunity to examine Marxist (historical materialist) perspectives on the evolution of capitalism and the current world system of socioeconomic formations.

I must first applaud Robinson's efforts, over several decades, to seek rigorous foundations in Marxist class theory and to avoid casual, standard thinking about national states and their "interests" (Robinson, 2004; 2005; 2014; 2023; and many others). Unlike many journalistic depictions of capitalist globalization, and the "decline of the nation state" ("globaloney"), Robinson's work focuses on the thrust of capitalist evolution toward formation of a *transnational capitalist class* (TCC) that transcends national boundaries and identities, but that also exists in conflict with national capitalist class fractions, and forms strategic associations with existing state formations (the United States has a special historically derived role in this regard), while seeking its complement in a transnational world state (TNS) that is in an early stage of development. This is a useful framework, and one that encourages serious empirical study.

I would propose, to pursue this line of analysis, that the concept of the *nation-state* and its role in the *stadial* (stage-related) evolution of capitalism needs further consideration. Robinson sees the growth of the firm (the capitalist unit of control) as a key aspect of capital accumulation. The individual capitalist firm thus eventually grows beyond the scale of the nation-state where it originally resides. He does not, however, pursue a deeper insight: Nation-states are themselves the product of an earlier stage of capitalist *diffusion*. They are also in turn central to the classic stage of capitalist *accumulation* (self-driven, valorized surplus value extraction, with a "passive" state) without which the new higher stage of diffusion — beyond existing nation-state boundaries, and using the political, financial and military resources of those nation-states, whose essence is captured by the term "imperialism" — would not have been possible.¹⁶

16 This is a highly condensed summary of my own attempt to contribute to a rigorous theory of capitalist stadial development, presented more fully in Laibman, 2005; cf. also Laibman, 2007, ch. 5. These essays were originally produced for a special issue of *Science & Society*, "The Deep Structure of the Present Moment" (July 2005), that was guest edited by Renate Bridenthal and myself.

To wit: The present-day system of social formations, dominated by capitalism, is a complex admixture of a spontaneous internal drive to accumulate — the core class process, which Robinson so admirably foregrounds — with the various powers and resources of the state. The state is always central, even when it is “passive.” When individual capitals acquire the power to control state resources and use them for their own ends, the transnational diffusion stage is reached, and the empire-building, violent qualities so visible in the late 19th and early 20th centuries emerge. Not (alas!) the “highest and last stage of capitalism,” imperialism itself now must seek transcendence: Accumulation must once again become internalized, spontaneous; so it must seek a *world-level* systemic framework, such as the one previously provided by the individual nation–state.

This world state, Robinson’s TNS, is, however, not only in an early stage of development; it is inherently problematic. Marx’s projection of a capitalist “world market” — the final book in his famous six-book plan (see Marx, 1970, “Preface”) — points, I would argue, to something capitalism cannot actually achieve. Robinson spots early shoots of the TNS in organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The problem is that the TNS must call into existence a *world political subject*: universal citizenship and a common world human identity. This in turn undercuts divisive nationalism, a major basis for deflection of working-class consciousness and reproduction of capitalist political control. In short: Given the advanced polarization of the class structure, to the point where the working class has become the vast majority of the population in most capitalist countries, is it possible for a TCC to maintain political hegemony, in the absence of national “others” onto whom the anger and rebellion of the working masses can be displaced?¹⁷

The question clearly points to a fundamentally negative answer — although this may play out in complex ways. But it also reveals a core contradiction between transnationalization of capitalist activity, on one hand, and the drive of capitalism for systemic control on a

17 It should go without saying that national consciousness and nationalism are not the only sources of division that support capitalist ideological hegemony. Religion, “racial” physical features, ethnicity, language and other cultural factors all have deep roots that can be enlisted to block the underlying pressure toward transnational working-class solidarity and the associated crisis of ideological control.

world level, on the other. If either side of this dialectic is obscured, the result will be one-sided and inadequate.

Robinson mounts an incisive critique of one of these one-sided reductions. Over a century ago, the advanced Western capitalist powers engaged in a round of empire-building and wars of conquest that marked the transition from the classical accumulation stage to a stage of external diffusion of capitalist power driven by state military and other resources. This marked the West as *the* imperialist center. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were not wrong! Beyond the basic conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie, the theorists of the Third International identified another level of contradiction, between what came to be known as the first and third worlds, and the prospect of forming coalitions with national bourgeoisies that (to borrow a phrase from the *Manifesto*) were able (for a time) to act in “an objectively revolutionary manner.” Domination by first-world powers over the third world was real, and the social movements’ responses to it were an important part of the positive shift in the world correlation of forces up through the victory over fascism in World War II, the rise of political independence in countries of the global South, and the emergence of the system of socialist states in Eastern Europe and Asia.

All of this, of course, is standard thumbnail history. In the 21st century, the Western capitalist powers are still the major presence in world affairs; their combined commercial, financial, political, and military forces are still at the heart of world conflict and antagonism, notwithstanding the emergence of some degree of multipolarity — the BRICS, the Asian Tigers, and so on. The Western capitalist powers still play the major role in the spread of capitalism and extraction of surplus value on a world scale, even though this role is now somewhat diffused and decentered. Robinson calls attention to the sloppy use of terms such as “U. S. national interests,” as though all that exists are “U. S.” capitalists who identify with that one country, as opposed to other countries. “Phrases such as ‘national interests’ (as in ‘defending U. S. interests’) are meaningless and have no place in Marxist analysis” (Robinson, 2024, xxx). Formation of large transnational entities with centers of control in multiple places around the world, which no longer identify as belonging to any particular nation–state — all of this has been well documented by Robinson and his colleagues, as has the emergence of increasingly powerful capitalist interests based

in other parts of the world, including Africa. *If* there is a “Manichean” impulse — the “bad” USA and Western Europe vs. the “good” rest of the world — it is indeed careless thinking, and Robinson is correct in pointing this out (Robinson, 2023).

The other reduction of the dialectic, however, is loss of focus on the strategic role of the advanced capitalist class centers, largely implemented through state policy; and this reduction must also be avoided. If we were to confine ourselves to documenting, anecdotally, the merging of “U. S.” and “U. K.” and “German” (not to speak of “Chinese” — but that is another story; see Laibman, 2022) capitalist interests, and to tracing the role of, *e.g.*, Rwandan firms in other central African countries, “Brazilian” companies that operate around the world and have ceased to be “Brazilian,” and so on, we would arrive at an undifferentiated picture of transnational corporations individually dominating, exploiting, and using various governments to supply troops and other means of coercion for this purpose. Since Robinson does not want to say that “countries” are imperialist (“countries” are not actors), this suggests that they can no longer be meaningfully sorted into dominating and dominated groups (*e.g.*, Global North vs. Global South). The strategic drive of world capitalism for control thus recedes from the picture. What remains are pieces of the TCC, which are everywhere, operating as production, financial and commercial entities. We thus wind up back in a simple “class against class” world. There are just “bad” and “good” actors, and Marxism needs only to accurately name and oppose the “bad” ones. We need not limit our critique to the Western powers. Other evil-doers — *e.g.*, Rwandan and Brazilian corporations, Russia and China — are not let off the hook.

This alternative one-sided reduction of the modern capitalist dialectic, however, has a cost: Our understanding of these actors and their actions is completely decontextualized. Crucially, the enduring legacy of the Russian Revolution’s transformation of international relations is obscured. Thus, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is “bad” — and therefore “capitalist.” We are denied the possibility of seeing the Russian war against Ukraine in its full context: the systematic encirclement of Russia by NATO, the externally manipulated 2014 coup in Ukraine and the proto-fascist forces involved in that coup. China has investments, through the Belt and Road Initiative, in Africa, and elsewhere; Chinese firms are therefore, almost by definition, “capitalist” and part

of the TCC. It becomes impossible to sort out levels of determination; so organizations in any country, to be exempt from inclusion in the overall umbrella of modern transnational capitalism, would have to be completely independent of any uncontroversially capitalist institutions elsewhere. If it is interconnected, it must be “capitalist.”

A key set of questions, then, for Robinson’s vision of a transnational capitalist world may well turn on whether or not, following the revolutions of 1917, 1947–8, 1949 and 1959 — and indeed the partial reversions of 1989–91 — there exists a *world class balance of forces*; whether the working class, largely confined as it is at present within national borders, has any capacity to resist complete subjugation; whether that capacity is embodied, historically and currently, in state structures and policies; and whether that embodiment plays a role in world conflicts. If the answers to these questions are positive, then the thinking of what Robinson calls the “Manichean anti-imperialist left” is not entirely misguided — despite the undoubtedly real transnationalization of capitalist power that has evolved in recent decades.

DAVID LAIBMAN

c/o Science & Society
 195 Montague Street, 14th Floor
 Brooklyn, NY 11201
 dlaibman@scienceandsociety.com

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IMPERIALISM AND A-IMPERIALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In “Imperialism, Anti-Imperialism, and Transnational Class Exploitation,” appearing in this issue, William Robinson offers a succinct and critical analysis of the Marxist theory of imperialism and the politics of anti-imperialism. Robinson argues that the theory of imperialism is inept in describing contemporary world capitalism, especially the emergence of the transnational capitalist class (TCC). He further argues that the anti-imperialist camp only “readily condemns capitalist exploitation and repression around the world when it is practiced by the United States and other Western powers,” while not sufficiently critical of other states, especially the victims of Western sanctions and abuses. Essentially Robinson is urging Marxists and leftists, in general, to rethink their conceptions of capitalism and formulate a viable strategy in fighting the U. S. state, “the greatest threat to the world’s people,” as well as supporting resistance to capitalist repressions around the world.

I appreciate Robinson’s works but disagree with his analysis of the status of world capitalism and the subsequent critique of the anti-imperialist left. The context is important for understanding Robinson’s critique. Imperialism has been at the center of the Marxist and leftist dialogues throughout the radical decades of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, the prominence of such topics started to wane. Readers who are familiar with the history of leftist politics would recognize that waves of scholars and activists have declared the death of the idea of “imperialism.” I have previously examined such critiques of the theory of imperialism in detail and argued that they are contemporary versions of the conservative Eurocentric politics that eventually dominated the Second International (Xu, 2021). Bill Warren was among the first to argue that imperialism had become a thing of the past and that capitalism had an inherent trend of abolishing

the straitjacket of imperialism. Later, Robert Brenner, by revisiting the transition to capitalism debate that took place in this journal, provided harsh critiques of the anti-imperialist camp (dependency and world-systems theories among others). Brenner rejected the relevance of imperialism and accused the anti-imperialists of having a “utopia of socialism in one country.” In more recent decades, influential left scholars such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as David Harvey, have expressed similar sentiments that capitalism has evolved, and the theory of imperialism is out of date and needs to be replaced by a decentered “empire” or “new imperialism.”

Despite the various academic disciplines in which these critiques were situated, they often share a fundamental political understanding that capitalism is almost undefeatable for now, and the best progressive politics is to spread better versions of capitalism worldwide and end all sorts of “authoritarian” or “repressive” regimes. Although sharing some important methodological points of view, Robinson’s critique differs from the Warren-Brenner type of conservatism, since he attempts to formulate a strategy of locating greater room for revolutionary socialist struggles. Therefore, there are two layers in Robinson’s analysis, the first being the factual analysis of the structure of world capitalism today, and the second being the socialist strategy based on the factual analysis. I will briefly engage with Robinson’s critique on these two levels.

First, is the concept of imperialism still relevant to understanding world capitalism today? I fully support Robinson’s efforts to critically examine the writings of Lenin and others in the Marxist tradition. We have for sure moved beyond the era of world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. Thanks exactly to the anti-imperialist struggles both in the West and the Third World, the Western powers lost most of their grasp of world territories. In Lenin’s time, imperialism referred to at least two main themes: inter-capitalist competition and war, as well as the hierarchical relationship between a handful of Western states and the rest of the world. And since the end of World War II, the Russian and the Chinese revolutions, and the independence movement, the old political map has changed profoundly, and much of Lenin’s analysis ceased to be meaningful. For example, as Robinson points out, and I agree, the existence of monopoly, or centralization of production, finance, and trade became prevalent in much of the Third World following national liberation struggles. So, it is no longer a useful method to divide imperialist from non-imperialist states. And

in that sense, I am also against the use of inter-imperialist rivalry in cases of United States-China, or United States-Russia relationships.

However, world capitalism remains a system where a small number of countries control the others, and thus imperialism remains a crucial concept. Imperialism was not and is not a purely “class-based” phenomenon. The emergence of imperialism in the capitalist era involved much of the nation-building and welfare state policies in the imperialist nations. The capacity of capitalists to rule their imperialist nations (primarily the working people) often depended on how much they could nurture the labor aristocracy based on the surplus that the capitalists stole, robbed, or expropriated “peacefully” from the non-imperialist nations. Marx and Engels have repeatedly talked about the corruption of the British working class by imperialism. In Lenin’s words, a defining feature of imperialism is “the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations” (Lenin, 1916). Despite many changes in the details, the hierarchy of world capitalism has changed very little. For example, the ranking of country-level per capita incomes was relatively stable from the late 19th century to the present (Xu, 2021; Li, 2021).

The rise of the TCC has been a product of a specific era of capitalism. Globalization was in essence based on the extension of world capitalism to the Third World and former socialist states. For a while, under the so-called “rules-based” or U. S.-centered global order, world capitalism functioned rather smoothly with the participation of capitalists from all over the world. But even during the honeymoon phase of the post-Cold War era, the hierarchy of world capitalism was evident, as the West, the so-called transition and emerging markets including China, and the rest of the Third World occupied distinct positions in the world division of labor. The TCC, as Robinson would recognize, is far from an equal partnership, but rather a capitalist pecking order. It still makes sense to use terms such as “imperialists” and “compradors,” considering the striking similarities between the 21st century and the pre-independence-era capitalist world orders.

Such an order, however, was based on the specific historical conjunction with unquestionable U. S. hegemony. With the crises of capitalism within the West and the rest of the capitalist world, the conditions where the TCC once prospered started to crumble. We just need to note the ongoing conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America as signs of the weakening of Pax Americana. Particularly, Russia gave

up on its post-Cold War effort to rejoin the West and was even able to gain an upper hand against the West militarily and economically. The world is changing fast, and when ideas of trade wars, de-risking, and decoupling are explicitly circulating among the Western elites, we know the days of the TCC being an important force in world capitalism are very likely numbered. Robinson's article also acknowledges this trend as we "are moving into a multipolar or polycentric world polity."

Now we can move on to the socialist strategy part. A strategy is related to, but quite distinct from scholarly inquiries. Unless we are talking about purely intellectual exercises for the few, an effective socialist movement would not be possible when world capitalism still runs normally with the usually dominant capitalist ideology, market, and violence.

To formulate such a strategy, at least for the initial spark, we need a thorough and sober understanding of the dynamics of world capitalism. Not all contradictions are of the same strategic importance in the transition from capitalism to socialism. There are myriads of problems in every corner of capitalism. But comparatively speaking, the advanced capitalist states have more bargaining chips (due to their position in world capitalism) in their hands and can afford much better material conditions for class compromises. Hence, solely concentrating on specific issues within capitalism could lead us to exhaust ourselves with reformist efforts and readily adopt Eurocentric criticisms, which often label the Third World with terms like "tyranny", "authoritarianism", and "despotism". Exposing and fighting all the inherent problems in capitalism is never wrong, but by itself, that is not a socialist strategy.

We still face the same question that Lenin and Mao faced a century ago, namely, to locate the weak links in world capitalism. In both Russia and China, socialists made unprecedented advances, in much-weakened states with relatively backward economies. The ruling classes were often paralyzed by wars and were not strong enough to lead meaningful struggles and/or to bribe the working people. In colonies and semi-colonies such as China, anti-imperialism had wide appeal and mobilized millions. A significant weakening of the imperialist powers and their compradors often supplied important preconditions for initial progressive social changes in such cases. As an important example, the Chinese communists greatly strengthened their political and military power under the united front with

the nationalist government during the long and successful struggle against Japanese imperialism.

Even though they worked with different historical conditions, both Lenin and Mao supported the revolutions in the Third World as well as national independence movements not led by communists. They for sure knew the general existence of exploitation and oppression in the Third World, but they saw the overall tide against imperialism as of strategic importance in building the momentum of the world revolution.

Today's world capitalism is safeguarded by the U. S.-led Western countries militarily and ideologically, while economically supported by the TCC with contributions from the so-called transition and emerging economies such as China. The anti-imperialist forces that target U. S. hegemony on various levels are an indispensable part of any socialist strategy to ending capitalism in the world. Compared to that, I would argue the many conflicts and contradictions that we see every day in the Third World are not always of the same magnitude of significance.

Ending capitalism on earth also necessarily requires conscious and unconscious collaborative efforts on a worldwide scale. People can debate whether such collaborations should be framed as a united front or a division of labor within the left. Nevertheless, I do see the urgency of a common understanding of anti-imperialism (particularly the U. S. hegemony) as a core of today's socialist struggles. People still can and should have important disagreements, but we can respectfully work with a constellation of practices. Let a hundred flowers bloom!

ZHUN XU

*Department of Economics
John Jay College and the Graduate Center
City University of New York
zhun1949@gmail.com*

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ON IMPERIALISM: REPLY TO THE S&S SYMPOSIUM

I want to thank Barbara Foley of the S&S editorial manuscript collective for pulling together this symposium and the six comrades who responded to my opening essay. There are two matters to address here. One is theoretical, the relationship between the economic and the political, which as applied to the present symposium involves the relationship of capital to the state, and specifically, the relationship between U. S. interventionism and transnational capital accumulation. Part of the problem — evident in several of the responses — are the twin traps of falling into a dualism of the economic and the political or of collapsing the economic and the political into one. I have insisted that the transnationalization of capital is qualitatively different from the international operations of “national” capitals and therefore we must rethink the relationship between the U. S. state and transnational capital.

The second is political: what position should socialists take in the face of working and popular class struggles around the world against transnational capitalist exploitation at a moment of declining U. S. hegemony, the rise of rival powerful capitalist states, and escalating geopolitical confrontation. At the *political* level it is U. S.-led Western states that are principally if not exclusively carrying out international coercive control and aggression against the working and popular classes and against targeted states whereas on the *economic* level there is nothing specifically U. S. or Western about intensifying capitalist exploitation and plunder around the world.

I agree with Alex Callinicos on the political critique of “campism” as “a confession of weakness, a reliance on rival states to resist the arrogance of U. S. power rather than on working-class struggle from below, together with the rest of the exploited and oppressed.” Callinicos goes on to define imperialism as “a *system* of rivalry among capitalist powers striving for regional and global domination” (emphasis in original) and argues that “imperialism exists only in the plural, as a struggle for domination among capitalist powers.” For me this definition is insufficient since it reduces imperialism to the state, or certain states, without specifying the relationship between transnational capital and this striving for states to become dominant in an international system. This is to say that he reduces imperialism to the political without specifying the relation of rivalry among states to the

economic, that is, to capital, the commanding heights of which are transnational.

The state congeals a certain composition and correlation of class and social forces grounded in the political economy of civil society; it is fused in a myriad of ways with capital and its hegemony in civil society. Callinicos says that since the 2008 global financial collapse “capitals have become increasingly reliant on a new burst of state interventionism in the context of intensifying geopolitical competition.” States “aren’t shoring up ‘transnational capitalism’ in general, but supporting the capitals particularly associated with them and *based in their territory*” (my emphasis). This first statement is correct but the second is misleading as it misses the point that these capitals based in U. S. territory are *transnational capitals* (by transnational I *do not* mean “foreign”). Historical symbols of “U. S. capital” such as U. S. Steel, GE Appliances, Budweiser, Jeep, Chrysler and Dodge, Ben and Jerry’s, and 7-Eleven, among so many others, belong to “foreign” corporations yet they all operate in the U. S. so that they benefit from U. S. state policies that Callinicos observes are intended to enhance capital accumulation in U. S. territory. But since this accumulation is undertaken by *transnational capital*, “the mutual interpenetration of nation-states and private firms” that Callinicos is right to claim continues to operate is an *interpenetration of national states with transnational capital*.

David Laibman and I agree that a fundamental contradiction in global capitalism is that economic globalization takes place within a nation-state/interstate-based system of political authority and domination. I agree with Laibman that what he calls the world state and I term *transnational state apparatuses* are inherently problematic. They are problematic not just because the TCC cannot maintain its political hegemony were working classes not divided into nationalities pitted against one another. They are also problematic for at least two other reasons. First, national states must achieve their legitimacy and assure the conditions for transnational capital accumulation in their own territories in competition with other national states. Second, the only thing that unites all transnational capitalists is the need to maintain an open global economy while controlling and repressing the global working and popular classes, that is, achieving the hegemony of global capital over global labor. Beyond this, the TCC is not and can never be an internally unified class fraction but its internal disunity does *not necessarily* — *mostly does not* — line up along national lines.

World class struggle, says Laibman, operates through the nation-state and part of the assessment of the worldwide social and class balance of forces involves an assessment of the class forces congealed in distinct historic moments in national states, in turn involving international relations and conflicts. I have argued as much at length elsewhere. Social/class agents operate — in fact, *can only* operate — through the mediation of institutions, which in the case of global capitalism is most importantly the national state. World class formation never took place *in* the nation-state but *through* it. The ability of different class groups and fractions to operate in and through the 200 some odd national states in the world is radically uneven. The conceptual problem arises when we jump from this observation to an epistemology of the capitalist state, and of class analysis, in reverse, from the top (the national state) down so that a statist precedes a class conception of the constitution of the state in an interstate system. The causal starting point must be not the already-constituted state but the composition of forces that determine the state and the historically contingent transformations that composition experiences. I agree with Laibman in the political need to condemn U. S. instigation of Russia and of the New Cold War with China. However, beyond acknowledging that U. S. interventionism is the single greatest threat to the world's people we must specify its relationship to transnational capitalist exploitation.

Steven Ellner says “the real issue is whether the left should prioritize the struggle against U. S. imperialism.” I do not know what this means in actual political practice for the left around the world as that assertion is typically advanced to ignore and even delegitimize critique of states that are in conflict with U. S. interventionism. In my 2023 essays I pointed to the bloody pitched battles that indigenous communities in the Peruvian highlands have been waging against Chinese-based transnational mining corporations that are exploiting and repressing them — even paying Peruvian police for this dirty work — as one among countless examples around the world. What position should the Peruvian left take in the face of massacres of indigenous by Peruvian police hired by the Chinese corporations? Should they conclude that in order to “prioritize the struggle against U. S. imperialism” they should not fight against this transnational corporate plunder and repression because it is being carried out by Chinese-based transnational capitalists? To these communities in struggle it matters

not that the U. S. state is aggressive toward, and in competition with, the Chinese state. In fact, U. S. interventionism in Peru included support for a coup in 2022 against a progressive president, and the U. S. supply of training and equipment to the Peruvian police is vital to the ability of these Chinese-based corporations and other transnational investors to access Peruvian resources and exploit Peruvian labor.

Ellner disapproves of my assertion that the BRICS “remains part of a brutal, exploitative, global capitalist world order in which BRICS capitalists and states are as much committed to control and exploitation of the global working class as are their Northern counterparts.” Here is Ellner’s Manichean thinking: if you acknowledge that “the BRICS signals a shift towards a more multipolar and balanced inter-state system,” as I do, then you cannot condemn the exploitation and brutality of the BRICS states. What does Ellner propose the left and the toiling masses in India, China, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and so on, actually do in their political practice? What would it mean for them to “prioritize the struggle against U. S. imperialism”?

Ellner, along with Julio Huato, *wildly* misunderstood me with regard to Rwanda. I did *not* state that Rwanda is an “imperialist state.” Rather, I am attempting to show the reader the inexorable conclusion we would have to reach if we matched the actual twenty-first century empirical reality to outdated left conceptions of imperialism. Huato moves us decidedly away from a *class-based* and to a *nation-state-based* theory of imperialism. Imperialism for him is something that one country does to another country. Anti-imperialism is something that an oppressed country practices against an oppressor country. The nation-state (which is not equivalent to the capitalist state) substitutes for classes as the agent of imperialism and anti-imperialism. In addition, he conflates state with capital, seamlessly compressing the two into one, amalgamating antagonistic class and social groups within the nation-state into a “class” insofar as he claims that international class struggle is the struggle of the South against the North.

Zhun Xu considers imperialism to be a “system where a small number of countries control the others” and refers to the ability of the “imperialist nations” to nurture a labor aristocracy. Let us put aside his notion that the labor aristocracy in the former First World is an enduring feature of world capitalism that can explain imperialism today rather than an historical feature in a process of erosion. I have addressed the problematic nature of this claim elsewhere (Robinson,

2002), and besides, Lenin never suggested that the existence of a labor aristocracy converts a class contradiction into a nation-against-nation contradiction. Xu assigns capitalists into two groups, imperialists and compradors, and then suggests that these are territorially distributed among countries, the former in the West and now China, the latter in the rest of the world. But such a claim does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. There are powerful “senior” global capitalists that are based in India, Mexico, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere that are anything but comprador and who invest heavily in former First World countries. Xu does not in this regard address the all-important matter of the appropriation and flow of global surplus that was central to concept of imperialism throughout the twentieth century. He wants to take global relations of exploitation and graft them on to a rigid political map of nation-states in the world order (in the process he conflates state with capital). He goes on note the decline of Pax Americana but how he jumps from this observation to the days of the TCC being “numbered” has me perplexed. His claim here bears no relationship to my concept of transnational capital. Pax Americana may be in decline but Pax Transnational Capital reigns supreme.

Turning to socialist strategy, Xu suggests that the “primary” contradiction is between an imperialist West with China now tagged on against the rest of the world. But the argument here is convoluted on several counts. The Russian and Chinese revolutions to which he refers were anti-imperialist and also anti-capitalist/socialist revolutions. The “anti-imperialism” of today’s BRICS has absolutely nothing to do with anti-capitalism and the struggle for socialism, much less with withdrawal from the circuits of global capital (Robinson, 2015). Xu associates me with a so-called “death of imperialism” school. This alleged association is a troubling political obfuscation of my insistence that we need to rethink what we mean by imperialism and how we understand U. S. interventionism. The risk of substituting a statist for a proletarian perspective is the abandonment of proletarian transnationalism in the name of “anti-imperialism.”

Tom Brass criticizes “nation-centric discourse about imperialism,” asking whether leftists should support nationalism on the grounds that the main enemy is an external imperialism, or socialism? Over a hundred years ago, as he notes, Lenin debated these matters with his comrades in the Second International. The socialist “must view as foremost the unity and fusion of the workers of oppressed nation with

the workers of the oppressing nation,” he argued in 1914, “because otherwise those social-democrats involuntarily become the allies of one or the other national bourgeoisie, which always betrays the interest of the people and of democracy.” It is apropos to Brass’s as well as Ellner’s and Xu’s comments to observe that Lenin added: “the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations always converts the slogan of national liberation into a means for deceiving the workers . . . in foreign politics it strives to enter into pacts with one of the rival imperialist powers for the purpose of achieving its own predatory aims” (Lenin, 2022[1914]), 140–141). When Lenin wrote these lines much of the former Third World consisted of colonies, had not fully transitioned into capitalism, and did not have powerful bourgeoisies that operated across the globe. We are living in a radically different capitalist world today.

WILLIAM I. ROBINSON

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