Imperialism

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Usages

Imperialism, in contemporary political economy, refers to an economic and political regime characterised by a hegemonic nation state imposing an exploitative economic relationship and oppressive political relationship upon one or more subaltern nation states, the metropole versus the periphery. The hegemon may be dominant globally (unipolar) or part of a competition with other imperial states (bipolar, multipolar). In the present period the US is the dominant hegemon.

Imperialism provides a theoretical framework for describing and explaining how the global economy works and the political relations between nation states. More importantly, it informs the strategies of political and social movements which are struggling to achieve a more equitable, convivial, and sustainable civilisation.

The structures and operations of imperialism have been reconfigured with the emergence of transnational capitalism or globalisation. In the Marxist tradition, there different views about the usefulness of the concept of 'imperialism' in the face of globalisation.

Robinson (2007) argues that “The class relations of global capitalism are now so deeply internalized within every nation-state that the classical image of imperialism as a relation of external domination is outdated”. In Robinson (2011) he argues that,

> *the system of nation-states as discrete interacting units, the inter-state system, is no longer the fundamental organizing principle of world capitalism and the principal institutional framework that shapes global social forces or that explains world political dynamics. The nation-state/inter-state centric perspective bound up with world-system theory – and for that matter with many other approaches to world capitalism and world order – has become a blinder that limits and increasingly distorts our understanding of contemporary global capitalism and its crisis.*

On the other hand, Petras and Veltmayer (2001) argue that ‘the term globalization obscures much more than it reveals’.

> *In practice, globalization provides a cover for a new form of imperialist exploitation and the institution of US hegemony over a global process of capital accumulation. In the last decade, capitalists in Europe and the United States have created favourable conditions for the takeover and recolonization of economies across the developing world. International capital has managed to restore highly profitable returns on investments and operations as never before, creating islands of opulent prosperity within a sea of growing poverty and misery. […] Globalization and imperialism are widely used as alternative frameworks for understanding the dynamics of the same worldwide developments and trends. Employing an imperialist analytical framework over that of globalization not only provides a better understanding but also points towards forces of resistance and opposition that through political action may bring about necessary change.*

I take the view that both frameworks are useful although for somewhat different purposes. Globalisation, depending on how it is conceived, can usefully trace global value chains, cycles of accumulation, and changing class relations. However, imperialism brings power and control into focus in ways that most accounts of globalisation fail to do (Legge 2018).

It is a complex field; millions of words have been published, and there are thousands of different variations on the theme. I structure my account of imperialism in the early decades of the 21st century around six trends:

- the changing role of the military industrial complex;
- the liberalisation of trade and investment (but not knowledge or migration);
- the organisation of production within global value chains controlled by transnational corporations;
- the outsourcing of lower skill, labour intensive production functions to low wage low rights jurisdictions;
- financialisation, of the national and global economies; and
- the reconfiguration of class structures.

This itemisation is somewhat arbitrary; first because these ‘trends’ are all mutually constitutive and interdependent; and second, because there are useful debates among the contemporary theorists of imperialism and presenting a coherent account of the general idea may involve leaving out some of the nuance of these debates.

The changing role of the military industrial complex

Imperialism does not require the exercise of formal political rule, as under colonialism, although it may involve direct rule in some cases and times. Colonialism was alive and well in 1916 when Lenin wrote his pamphlet about imperialism, but he was writing in the context of fierce competition between European imperialisms. Colonialism was still the dominant mode of relation between metropolis and periphery (and mediated the transfer of value from periphery to metropole, see Patnaik and Patnaik 2021) but Lenin's project was to understand the dynamics of metropolitan capitalism which drove colonialism.

The de-colonisation which followed the second world war was in part a consequence of national liberation movements, but it was also part of the ascendancy of US imperialism which needed full access to the European [ex]colonies. Changes were taking place in the global economy which enabled the imperial state to impose economic hegemony without always needing formal political control.

Significant changes in the role of the military in imperialism have taken place across the century following 1916. A new mode of imperial domination involving covert destabilisation, surrogate conquest through sponsored militaries, and economic sanctions have largely replaced overt armed force colonisation. Invasion has remained an option as in Vietnam following the Second World War and Iraq and Afghanistan 50 years later. However, while the direct role of military conquest in imperial policing may have receded somewhat, the need to build a strong military to support (or resist) encroachment across the boundaries of competing empires has remained paramount (Taiwan, Ukraine). Overshadowing these different scenarios regarding the use of military force is the significance of public expenditure on the arms industry; first, as an investment in technological innovation (gifted to private ownership); and second, as an expression of 'military Kenesianism'. The burden of military expenditure is vitiated to some extent through arms sales to client states.

The liberalisation of trade and investment (but not agriculture, knowledge or migration)

'Free trade' has historically been the policy slogan of the dominant imperialism, and commonly advanced through military as well as diplomatic means (as in the destruction of the Indian textile industry by the British and the Opium Wars in China).

Free trade in manufactured goods was promoted through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) adopted after the Second World War and was extended further with the creation of the World Trade Organisation in 1994 and the forest of bilateral trade and investment agreements negotiated from that period. The liberalisation of trade in goods and services is also promoted through imperial war (as in Vietnam) and through economic sanctions (as in Iran), and through US trade sanctions linked to Special 301 provisions of the US Trade Act (as in Thailand).

The progressive liberalisation of trade in goods and services has been strongly advocated by transnational corporations (from across the capitalist world), not just the TNCs of US imperialism. This is a significant change from earlier imperialisms when free trade within the empire was a tool against competing empires.

The liberalisation of trade in goods, services and investment stands in sharp contrast to the continuing protection of rich world agriculture (against imports from the global South); the escalating protections of corporate intellectual property (while enabling corporate access to traditional knowledges and resources); and the brutal constraints on migration from the global South to North (including economic, climatic and humanitarian migration).

This combination of liberalisation (with respect to goods, services, and investment) and protection (of agriculture, intellectual property, and migration) has played a critical role in opening the world economy to the transnational corporations of the imperial North and reconfiguring production (into thin global supply chains controlled by the TNCs, see below) and reconfiguring class relationships (and the emergence of the new transnational capitalist class, see below).

Economic globalisation has created space for TNCs from Europe, Japan, China, South Korea, etc as well as new institutions which serve the transnational capitalist class without regard to nationality.

This has led commentators such as Robinson to argue that the concept of imperialism, defined in terms of relations between nation states (hegemonic relations between metropolis and periphery, and competing relations between different imperialisms) is no longer useful in understanding the global polity and economy. This position is only tenable if one ignores the global policing role played by the US military, including its huge military budget, thousands of military bases on foreign soils, and frequent military adventures.

The organisation of production within global value chains controlled by transnational corporations

Contemporary economic globalisation is characterised by the organisation of investment, innovation, production, marketing, and sales through global value chains controlled in each case by an oligopoly of huge transnational corporations. The shape of these global value chains and the modalities of control, vary across different industries (consumer technologies, supermarkets, convenience foods, entertainment, digital services, financial services, pharmaceuticals, health care and health insurance, and fossil fuels). The oligopolists managing these global value chains are able to use their market power, access to technology, and access to investment funding to drive hard bargains with their suppliers (competing to supply the TNCs) and their distributors or franchisees (competing to maintain their involvements).

The power of the TNCs, and their position astride these global value chains, is not the consequence of the invisible hand of market forces but has been carefully constructed through a combination of imperial and market power.

The role of the imperial powers in enabling and sustaining this globalisation on behalf of the transnational capitalist class is most clearly evident in the economic reforms driven by the IMF and World Bank as part of their structural adjustment policies, brought into play when countries (particular LMICs) have faced various debt crises. These reforms typically involve cutting government expenditure on urban infrastructure and human services (to free up tax revenues to service foreign debt), devaluing the currency to make exports cheaper to earn foreign currency for debt repayment (notwithstanding the impact on the prices of imported goods), and tax concessions and infrastructure projects to attract foreign investment.

Further restructuring of the global economy was effected through the adoption of new global trade rules through the WTO agreements (from 1986) followed by regional and bilateral trade and investment agreements. The aggregate effect of these agreements has been the combination of liberalisation and protection described above.

Imperial discipline has played a central role in this global restructuring including covert destabilisation (Chile), and surrogate warfare (Iran) as well as the use of economic sanctions (based on the power of the US over banks all over the world to block dollar transactions) and the use of trade sanctions (under Special 301 provisions of the US Trade Act), denying or restricting access to the US market through tariffs and quotas to punish countries seen to be defying globalisation.

However, it is not just the imperial states which are driving globalisation. It is also the financial markets through which the managers of capital are able to exact punishment for such defiance. The threat of selling off a country's currency or precipitating a collapse in share prices or increasing the interest costs of borrowing are all powerful expressions of 'market sentiment' as a modality of control. The threat of such sanctions is generally communicated (and initiated) by the international financial institutions, the development banks and the financial media.

Another expression of 'market sentiment' is manifest in the negotiations between TNCs and countries over the prospect of large investments, with the corporations demanding tax concessions and exemptions from environmental and labour regulation as conditions for such investment. Such tax and regulatory extortion is commonly supported by the development banks through promises of linked lending.

The outsourcing of lower skill, labour intensive production to low wage, low labour rights jurisdictions

Outsourcing is one of the central means through which workers on LMICs are exploited through global value chains (or what Suwandi (2019) calls 'labour value chains').

The archetypal examples are the iPhone, the T shirt, and coffee beans. In each case the TNC is able to force its suppliers / contractors in LMICs to extract maximum value for minimum wages from their employees while adding huge markups (accruing to the parent corporation) when the product is sold in the metropolis.

According to conventional national accounting the low prices which the TNCs pay their suppliers for the iPhone, the T shirt or the unroasted beans simply reflects market conditions. As the price paid by the parent corporation is kept low (through low wages, long hours and tight supervision) then the value added in China or Bangladesh or Brazil is recorded in national accounts as relatively small. Because of the arm's length relation between the parent corporation and the supplier the price paid by the parent for the finished product is recorded in official statistics as the cost of an import. The massive mark up is then recorded as value added in distribution, marketing, and sales which reduces nominal profit in the metropolis. The imperial state accrues tax revenues and benefits from foreign exchange when the product is exported (from the metropolis).

Smith (2016) cites a study by Linden and colleagues of iPod production (in China) and sales (in the US) 2006.

> *Linden et al. found that "the iPod and its components accounted for about 41,000 jobs worldwide in 2006, of which about 27,000 were outside the U.S. and 14,000 in the U.S. The offshore jobs are mostly in low- wage manufacturing, while the jobs in the U.S. are more evenly divided between high-wage engineers and managers and lower-wage retail and non-professional workers". Just under 8,000 US workers were "retail and other non-professional" workers (average wages, $25,580 per year), and 6,000 were "professional" workers, that is, managers and engineers involved in research and development (receiving, on average, $85,000 per annum). Meanwhile, 12,250 Chinese production workers received $1,540 per annum, or $30 per week-just 6 percent of the average wages of U.S. workers in retail, … and 1.8 percent of the salaries of U.S. professional workers. The number of workers employed in iPod-related activities was similar in the United States and China, yet the total U.S. wage bill was $719m and the total Chinese wage bill was $l 9m.*

Smith also quotes from a study published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2010 which reported on the first version of Apple's iPhone, revealing an even more spectacular markup:

> *iPhones were introduced to the U.S. market in 2007 to large fanfare, selling an estimated 3 million units in the U.S. in 2007, 5.3 million in 2008, and 11.3 million in 2009. The total manufacturing cost of each iPhone was $178.96 and sold for $500, yielding a gross profit of 64 percent to be shared between Apple, its North American suppliers and distributors, and the U.S. government, all appearing as value-added generated within the United States.*

The main focus of the ADB study was the effect of iPhone production on the U.S. trade deficit in its China trade, finding that,

> *most of the export value and the deficit due to the iPhone are attributed to imported parts and components from third countries .... Chinese workers ... contribute only US$6.50 to each iPhone, about 3.6 percent of the total manufacturing cost.*

It is evident that the Chinese workers are being exploited in that, because of their relative powerlessness in the labour value chain, they are being paid a very small proportion of the realised value of their labour power. However, the Chinese people more generally are also being exploited, first, because the Chinese share of the total tax levied across the labour value chain is extremely small and because the Chinese share of the aggregate profit is also very small (with implications for capital accumulation and economic development in China).

The exploitation FoxConn workers in China, garment workers in Bangladesh and coffee pickers in Brazil; and of the peoples of China, Bangladesh, and Brazil, is not due to the inevitable workings of the 'invisible hand' of market forces. Rather it is the consequence of a carefully engineered system, the management of global production and trade within global value chains controlled by huge TNCs. It is a system which has been forged by the combined efforts of transnational capital and the imperialist powers, including through structural adjustment, neoliberal reform, a bespoke trade regime, corporate extortion and the brutality of 'market sentiment'.

> *By uprooting hundreds of millions of workers and farmers in Southern nations from their ties to the land and their jobs in protected national industries, neoliberal capitalism has accelerated the expansion of a vast pool of super-exploitable labor. Suppression of its free movement across borders has interacted with this hugely increased supply to produce a dramatic widening of international wage differentials between industrialized and developing nations, vastly exceeding price differences in all other global markets.* (Smith 2016)

Financialisation

Financialisation, understood as the disproportionate growth of the financial sector in comparison with industrial sector (producing real goods and services) was identified by Lenin as a core feature of imperialism in his 1916 pamphlet although he recognised industrial capital as a driver of imperial expansion, with an eye to new sources of raw materials and wider markets. He highlighted finance capital as a critical driver of imperial expansion (and inter-imperial conflict) because of the need to find outlets for investment. Profits from industrial capital, flowing to the banks and other financial institutions, were in excess of the investment needs of the industrial sector, limited to producing for the domestic market and such foreign markets as it could access.

Since that time the financial sector has grown hugely relative to the industrial sector. Sweezy in 1994 commented that,

> *Financial capital, once cut loose from its original role as a modest helper of a real economy of production to meet human needs, inevitably becomes speculative capital geared solely to its own self-expansion. In earlier times no one ever dreamed that speculative capital, a phenomenon as old as capitalism itself, could grow to dominate a national economy, let alone the whole world. But it has. […]*
>
> *What I am talking about is the development in the last twenty years or so of a relatively independent—relative, that is, to what went before—financial superstructure sitting on top of the world economy and most of its national units. It is made up of banks—central, regional, and local—and a host of dealers in a bewildering variety of financial assets and services, all interconnected by a network of markets, some of which are structured and regulated, others informal and unregulated. […]*
>
> *It has long been taken for granted, especially among radicals, that the seat of power in capitalist society was in the boardrooms of a few hundred giant multinational corporations. While there is no doubt about the role of these entities in the allocation of resources and other significant matters as well, I think there is an added consideration that needs to be stressed. The occupants of these boardrooms are themselves to an increasing extent constrained and controlled by financial capital as it operates through the global network of financial markets.*

> *In other words, real power is not so much in corporate boardrooms as in the financial markets. Here a footnote: the giant corporations are also major players in these markets and help to give them their importance. It looks as though Adam Smith's invisible hand is staging a comeback in a new form and with increased muscle.*

The reach of the financial sector was largely restricted to the nation state when Lenin wrote, but it has now globalised with transnational banks, insurance companies, pension funds, wealth funds and other financial institutions sitting astride the global stocks and flows of capital. While the banks retain their relationships with their home imperial state, they also prowl the world looking for rent. As a consequence, the logic of inter-imperial encroachment is somewhat blunted.

The structural imbalance between productive capacity and aggregate demand remains a core weakness of capitalism but is aggravated by sharply rising productive capacity facing stagnant demand globally. The sluggish growth in demand is in part a consequence of the constraints on wages in both the metropolis and periphery.

The combination of debt funded consumption and financial speculation help to manage the financial bloat, and to defer the crisis of overproduction.

Debt funded consumption by households, corporations, and governments has the effect of sustaining demand albeit at the cost of progressively transferring title to the banks. Household borrowing (for housing, education, and health care) helps to sustain demand in those sectors. However, the discounted assets left following each default are absorbed by the lender. Likewise, corporations are encouraged by their shareholders to meet their investment needs through borrowing rather than corporate savings. Shareholders would generally prefer to pocket their profits as dividends and share buy backs.

The second mechanism to manage the financial bloat is to direct profit flows into financial speculation. The bulk of transactions in housing, share, bond and currency markets are speculative aiming to profit from ups and downs through buys and sells. While asset values inflate, participants gain from each engagement and their wealth flows through the economy more generally. When the bubbles bursts, the players who were last to leave are left holding assets of much reduced value. Again, the losses will find their way through the economy more broadly. However, capitalism prospers from creative destruction. Thousands of derelict homes left after the 2007 sub-prime crash create new prospects for investment and growth in housing construction.

Clearly financialisation is feature of contemporary capitalism; but is it relevant to imperialism? As I discuss below, contemporary imperialism is a joint project of transnational capitalism and the imperial states. The transnational capitalist class has its roots in the top management and ownership of the transnational corporations and banks and in the corridors of power of the imperial states.

I examine this partnership by looking at some of the policy demands that the owners and managers of capital may address to the imperial state; looking for domestic and international action to look after the interests of the financial sector. I review three specific cases:

- The stagflation of the 1970s, the interest rate hike of 1980 and structural adjustment;
- The US trade deficit; and
- The 'containment' of China.

Stagflation refers to the combination of stagnation and inflation which bedevilled capitalist economies from the mid 1970s. The stagnation of this period reflected emerging 'overproduction', a structural imbalance between productive capacity and aggregate demand. Keynesian policies were ineffective in boosting growth but did contribute to inflation. Owners of wealth (in particular, lenders of money) hate inflation because it reduces the real value of their wealth and of debts owing. Workers were also impacted by the loss of buying power of their wages.

The interest rate hike of 1980 was directed by Reagan and Thatcher with a view to controlling the inflation side of stagflation, by deepening the stagnation into a recession. The 'fight inflation first' slogan was directed at breaking the unions of the metropolis as their demands for wage increases were seen to be the principal cause of the inflation. In fact, the inflation was at least partly due to price increases following US expenditures on military supplies required to support the US invasion of Vietnam.

The global recession which followed, not only weakened the unions but also wrought economic devastation on developing countries who had borrowed when oil money was cheap but faced rapidly increasing servicing costs because of increased interest rates. The debt crisis which followed was managed by the IMF and WB through the imposition of structural adjustment which launched the neoliberal revolution and the transformation of imperialism that I am reviewing here.

A second example of the interplay of the power of transnational capital and imperial power centres around the US dollar exchange rate. The US has a long-standing trade deficit (imports exceeding exports) which for any other country would lead to a decline in the value of the US dollar. (If the US is buying more stuff than it is selling, US dollars should be easier to obtain and hence cheaper.) However, many countries have sought to build up foreign currency reserves (which they store in US dollars) to have some defence against speculative currency attacks by financial raiders. The high value of the dollar enables US consumers to buy foreign made imports (iPhones, T shirts, coffee beans) more cheaply. It also helps to support the total demand for such products.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis was precipitated by a speculative attack on the Thai baht: slow quiet buying gradually pushes up the exchange rate and then a sudden sell off yields fat profits for the raiders. Smaller LMICs are particularly exposed to this kind of raid where they have succumbed to the combined pressure of the imperial hegemon and market sentiment to remove controls on the flow of capital. In the absence of capital controls, they are obliged to insure against speculative attacks by buying US Treasury bonds. The opportunity cost of this defence can be measured in terms of the economic resources not being directed to social and economic development.

Our third example of the interplay of imperial and corporate power is the increasingly desperate attempt to 'contain' China with a view to protecting the US dollar as the premium currency in global trade and as a value store for sovereign savings. US laws regulating banks who deal in dollars are critical for imposing economic sanctions on countries and organisations who defy the imperial authority, including North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan and Wikileaks. The US can threaten to destroy foreign banks by denying them the right to deal in dollars, if they accept transactions involving the objects of such sanctions. China makes no secret of its long-range plans to elevate the yuan to compete with the dollar as a trading currency and a value store. While the US has other reasons for seeking to contain China's rise, the hegemonic power of the dollar is an important one. Transnational capital has benefited greatly from the imperial restructuring of the global economy. It is not clear how much of this edifice a new Chinese empire would wish to dismantle but some of the key props of the regime could be destabilised with serious consequences for western based TNCs. These could include the TRIPS regime, and the reach of the IMF and WB. The protection of European and US agricultural corporates could also be at risk. US provocations regarding the status of Taiwan take on ominous significance in this light.

A further feature of contemporary financialisation which should be noted is the role of the financial sector in cultivating 'shareholder capitalism'. Partly as a consequence of neoliberal policies of privatisation many people in the imperial homelands are deeply invested in the health of the financial system: through their savings in pension funds and wealth funds; and through the terms of their loans (for housing and education in particular); and also as citizens through national sovereign wealth funds. This creates a significant swathe of the population who are following interest rates, exchange rates and share prices closely and who can be mobilised by the finance industry to apply political pressure as needed on the imperial state or on subaltern states. These constituencies identify with prevailing capitalist ideologies which render logical and appropriate government policies which are directed to shoring up the structures of imperialism including the exploitation of workers and LMICs. Thus, if a developing country decides to impose controls on capital flight to guard against speculative currency attacks, it makes perfect sense for the citizen shareholders that their financial agents should sell off shares or currencies or urge their politicians to put pressure on the errant government.

The reconfiguration of class

My sixth defining characteristic of contemporary imperialism is the reconfiguration of class, globally.

In brief, the most critical change from 1916 is the emergence of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) incorporating the industrial, financial, political and military elites of the capitalist world. A division has emerged between the nationally oriented fraction of the capitalist class (who may be somewhat ambivalent about economic globalisation) and the globally oriented fraction, broadly associated with the industrial and financial behemoths girdling the globe.

Patnaik and Patnaik (2021) describe the emergence of this division of the national capitalist class in the context of decolonisation and political independence in the countries of the periphery.

> *The bourgeoisie in these countries, including the big bourgeoisie, which had been thwarted in its ambitions in the colonial period, had demanded and obtained from the new post-colonial state protection against metropolitan capital. Not only were these economies cordoned off from free capital flows, but they were protected against the free flows of goods and services, so that the big bourgeoisie could carve out for itself a space where it could fulfill its ambition without worrying about any encroachment by metropolitan capital. Third world dirigisme [extensive state involvement in the economy] had been a weapon used by the local big bourgeoisie against metropolitan capital. But the use of this weapon had also benefited a host of petty producers, peasants, and craftsmen who had also been protected from encroachment by metropolitan capital.*
>
> *The dirigiste regime had thus been a carryover of the anti-colonial struggle. And the big bourgeoisie engaged in manufacturing (called the "national bourgeoisie" in contrast to the "comprador bourgeoisie" engaged in colonial trade), which had been a part of the anti-colonial struggle and in leadership of it in countries where the Communists or similar left formations were not leading it, continued even after decolonization to remain in the camp of the working people against metropolitan capital, though with its own motivations and ambitions.*
>
> *What we find under neoliberalism is a shift in its position. It now makes common cause with metropolitan capital to "open up" the world for free flows of capital and of goods and services, to the detriment of vast sections of peasants and petty producers, and even small capitalists. The hiatus that existed earlier between the "national economy" and metropolitan capital now shifts its location to within the country, between international finance capital with which the domestic big bourgeoisie gets integrated and the rest of the economy, which suffers in terms of output and employment because of the "opening up" to free flows of capital and goods and services. The second change that occurs is the change in the nature of state intervention. Since the nation-state cannot afford to offend international finance capital (for fear of creating a financial crisis through capital out- flows in the event of its doing so), the state intervenes almost exclusively at the behest of such globalized capital. Instead of appearing to stand above classes and playing the role of a detached and benevolent umpire, which the bourgeois state had traditionally*

> *tried to do, it now intervenes in the interests of globalized capital in general and its local counterpart, the domestic corporate-financial oligarchy, under the pretense that the interests of this oligarchy is coterminous with the interests of the nation. A notion of "development" is adopted for this purpose, so that anyone opposed to such intervention in favor of the corporate-financial oligarchy is branded as "anti-development" and hence ipsofacto "anti-national."*

The transnational capitalist class has a clear self-awareness. The members of this class live similar lifestyles, have rich networks and opportunities for communicating with each other, and are conscious of their shared interests which generally align with those of the imperial hegemon. (The owners and managers of Chinese and Russian TNCs may be exceptions.)

In contrast to its own coherence, the TCC confronts a dispersed and heterogeneous melee of working classes, petty bourgeois and marginalised dispossessed classes, fractured in various degrees across gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality as well as economic interests (see Intersectionality).

US imperialism and transnational globalised capitalism are destroying the human habitat and creating a deepening divide between rich and poor. It is most unlikely that the forces which are accelerating these trends would be able to change direction (or would even want to). Accordingly, the most promising strategy for the countries and peoples who are being exploited and dispossessed by this regime must involve a convergence of analysis and strategies across these heterogeneous constituencies. Such a convergence must involve confronting the forces and dynamics of both imperialism and transnational capitalism (see Convergence).

‘Imperialism’ is a necessary theoretical resource for public health

The usefulness of the term ‘imperialism’ for public health is self-evident, including the network of ideas summarised above. Some of the important applications of these ideas in public health include the following.

Global warming

The threats to human health associated with global warming include extreme heat, floods, and wildfires. Most devastating are the threats to food supplies associated with drought and the humanitarian costs of the huge migrations and associated conflicts.

Theories of imperialism as summarised above contribute to understanding the drivers of global warming, the forces behind climate denialism, and the barriers to mitigating and adapting in a just manner. They underline the importance of responding to global warming in ways which also roll back imperialism and transnational capitalism.

Ecocide

Global warming is just one contemporary destabilisations of the human habitat and the earth’s biosphere more broadly. The threats to health associated with loss of biodiversity include food insecurity and pandemic risk. Industrial farming touted as the solution to food insecurity is contributing to both the loss of biodiversity and pandemic risk as well as the displacement of millions of small farmers from sustainable farming.

Theories of imperialism throw light on the drivers of extractivism, and the loss of biodiversity. Capitalism depends on stoking consumption and waste which are normalised in a culture of materialism, defended and promoted through imperialism. Rolling back imperialism and transnational capitalism must be as part of a cultural and economic transformation towards an equitable, inclusive and sustainable civilisation.

Unequal exchange

The health consequences of a global regime based on unequal exchange (between metropolis and periphery) are huge, including lack of infrastructure (housing, health care), workforce limitations (including health care), and limited educational opportunities. The consequences of unequal exchange are mediated in part by the poverty of governments and of households in the global South.

Theories of imperialism provide ways of understanding how social and economic development (equitable, inclusive and sustainable) is blocked by the demands of transnational capitalism, defended and promoted by imperialism. They also highlight how overcoming these barriers (to installing urban infrastructure, providing universal education and health care, and ensuring access to decent work for all) must involve rolling back transnational capitalism and its imperial support structures.

Deepening inequality

The increasing wealth of the transnational capitalist class (in the global North and South) starkly confronts huge numbers of families in relative and absolute poverty.

Theories of imperialism explain how economic inequality is being deepened, within and between countries, by an interplay of financialisation (and the bloated incomes of the gated 1%) and the neoliberal transformation of investment and production (and the immiseration of the excluded and exploited, including through outsourcing). Such theories also point out how the cultivation of misogyny, ethnic bigotry, and neofascism helps to obscure the role of transnational capitalism and imperialism in the deepening of such inequality and divides the political and social movements which are needed to forge a different future.

Food systems

The food systems engineered by transnational capitalism contribute to NCDs from junk food pressures and (in many countries) from excessive meat consumption (also contributing to global warming, loss of biodiversity and pandemic risk, see Wallace 2016). Industrial agriculture displaces and impoverishes small farmers contributing to rural to urban migration and urban poverty and unemployment.

Theories of imperialism demonstrate how contemporary food systems, serving the interests of transnational food companies, have been engineered, partly through the power of the corporations but also the deliberate projection of imperial power in relation to finance, trade, and investment and where necessary through political destabilisation.

Migration and asylum-seeking

Migration and asylum-seeking are both consequences of various threats to health but also carry significant risks including violence, drowning, poverty and lack of housing.

Theories of imperialism point to drivers of economic migration (deepening inequality, rural to urban migration from industrial farming), climate migration (especially from drought and food insecurity), and humanitarian displacement (escaping from war, communal violence, and political oppression). Such theories underline the need to address migration crises in ways which also address such drivers.

Dangerous work

Economic exploitation across the various global value chains through which production is organised is associated with a wide range of work-related health risks. These include unsafe factories (Rana Plaza), physical injuries, toxic exposures of farm workers, unsafe mining, and psychological harm.

These harms reflect managerial pressures for productivity; the organisation of work in ways which prioritise profit over dignity, autonomy and collaboration, self-esteem and social appreciation; and the neoliberal drive for low paid precarious employment. These drivers reflect the profit pressures of capitalism, whether locally, nationally or globally organised. However, imperial power as well as the demands of financial markets, play a powerful role in creating and defending the conditions in which such profit pressures are prioritised.

Medicines and vaccines

Pharmaceutical industry spokespeople commonly celebrate the technical advances in medical science in recent decades, including the widening range of effective treatments and vaccines. Pharma spokespeople commonly attribute the successes of the modern pharmaceutical industry to intellectual property protection and the associated incentives to invest in research and development.

However, there are significant downsides to the way the transnational pharmaceutical industry operates.

- **Profit, rather than needs driven investment in R&D**. This is reflected in the investment which goes into expensive treatments for rare conditions as opposed to cheaper treatments for common conditions. The lack of investment in the 'neglected tropical diseases', in new TB treatments and new antibiotics illustrate this bias.
- **Huge expenditures on marketing.** Pharma defends its IP protected monopoly profits with reference to its investment in innovation. However, the big corporations spend more on marketing than on innovation with dire consequences such as the Oxycontin epidemic in the US (Van Zee 2009) and the spread of antibiotic resistance.
- **Unaffordable prices**. In the late 1990s pharma was offering anti-retrovirals for AIDS treatment in South Africa and other affected countries at prices which knowingly excluded access to almost all patients. Thirty nine pharmaceutical companies joined in a suit against the South African government as part of their defense of this kind of unaffordable pricing (Heywood 2009). They were defeated, largely through popular mobilisation and protest, and over the next few months the prices dropped from $1000 to $300 per treatment year. This disregard of population health need was in evidence again in the Covid pandemic where pharma refused to participate in WHO's Covid Technology Access Pool (for sharing technology and enabling wider production), and bypassed the Covax facility by continuing to give preference to bilateral vaccine contracts on the part of the rich countries; and organised against the waiver of certain TRIPS obligations, proposed in order to facilitate wider production.

Notwithstanding its involvement in innovation, the transnational pharmaceutical industry has repeatedly prioritised profit over people's health with serious and ongoing consequences measured in mortality and morbidity. Such prioritisation is entirely compatible with the logics and practices of capitalism. However, the concept of imperialism throws light on why and how the global regulatory environment has been engineered so as to maximise the freedom of pharma to behave in this way.

Privatisation

The privatisation of publicly administered health services in high income countries and the encouragement of privately delivered services in LMICs have been prominent expressions of the neoliberal package over the last forty years, led in particular by the World Bank and more recently the Rockefeller Foundation (Birn 2014). Likewise, the neoliberal movement has sought to create more space for private health insurance in both HICs and LMICs. 'Universal health coverage', the contemporary slogan de jour in global health, is a rhetorical compromise between WHO where there is strong support for publicly funded, publicly delivered health care and the World Bank which is a long standing supporter of private funding and delivery.

The evidence is clear that in a privatised health system, the practitioners and facilities will cluster in the cities and where people can afford their services and universal health insurance coverage is restricted to the wealthy but rationed for the poor. In the context of widening economic inequality the consequences of these tendencies include denial of access as well as inequity and inefficiency.

The immediate beneficiaries of privatisation of health care and health care financing are the hospital and health insurance companies (as well as the urban elites around whom such services cluster). However, the regulatory context within which this movement is taking place has been deliberately designed and engineered. It is designed by the neoliberal strategists (World Bank, OECD, financial press, etc) who are determined to limit public expenditure on health care and by the finance industry looking for new investment opportunities. It has been engineered through trade agreements, including the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the inclusion of investor state dispute settlement provisions in various bilateral agreements. It has also been engineered by the deliberate marginalisation of WHO which, reduced to mendicant status, has been forced to promote the slogan of UHC even while recognising that it is a Trojan horse for privatisation.

Clearly the pressures of privatisation reflect the appetite of transnational health care and health insurance corporations. However, the imperial hegemon has played a key role, in harmony with market sentiment, in the creation of the environment in which their appetite can be fed.

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