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The Imperialist Question: A Sociological Approach

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ABSTRACT: *This article provides a conceptual background to the general theme of this Special Issue 'On Imperialism in the Middle East'. First, we posit that the concept of imperialism can be understood as a sociological process, through an approach that centres the primacy of politics vis-à-vis accounts that sever theory and praxis via empiricism. In probing this issue, the article shows how dominant academic narratives explaining wars in the region disarticulate them from history. Second, we show that wars, waste, and militarism—also termed as accumulation by waste—are the predominant activities of the US-led imperialist age, historically unleashed on the South of the world. Consequently, we end discussing how the study of US-led imperialism becomes the focus around which each article in this issue recentres its analytical contribution.*

KEY WORDS: *Accumulation by waste; imperialism; militarism; pentagonism; war*

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab region has experienced an increasing rise of wars and conflicts. In Yemen, thousands of people live at high risk of famine and hunger, as more than twelve million people require humanitarian assistance, covering health, food, and shelter-related services because of the carpet-bombing of the country carried out by Saudi Arabia and its US-supported coalition. As the head of World Food Programme (WFP) sadly openly admitted in February 2022, 'we have no choice but to take food from the hungry to feed the starving'.¹ In Libya, the country's sovereignty collapsed under a brutal NATO-led military campaign in 2011, and foreign powers and their local allies have continued to fight over the spoils of war. Capital flight and embezzlement of public money has become the norm, and ordinary Libyans have become accustomed to living in endless duress, accepting what used to be a peculiar feature of Lebanon, meaning: prolonged shortages of water, electricity cuts and currency devaluation. In Tunisia, despite the 'success' of the 2011 protests, food shortages and IMF-imposed austerity measures suffocate the working classes. The alternating governments, at the same time, increase their military budgets, acquiring and receiving Western-made weapons and military assistance to counter 'ever-

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¹ World Food Programme (2022) Countdown to Catastrophe Begins in Yemen as Funding for Food Assistance Dwindles Available online at: <https://www.wfp.org/news/countdown-catastrophe-begins-yemen-funding-food-assistance-dwindles>, accessed October 26, 2022.

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increasing security threats'.² In a state of complete economic and social devastation, Syria and neighbouring Lebanon have registered their first cholera cases since 1993.³ Although Egypt had its last war in 1973, it nevertheless was devastated by the neo-liberal policies instituted after the Camp David Peace Accords. Egypt's case is a reminder of Lin Biao's remark that 'war brings destruction, sacrifice, but the destruction, sacrifice and suffering is much greater if no resistance is offered to imperialism as the people become willing slaves'.⁴ Egypt's current rate of poverty and the malnutrition of its children only could bespeak of tragedy incurred in wartime-like conditions.⁵ In Palestine, Israel continues to unleash its violence in the West Bank alternating daily house demolitions, killings, and arrests, together with the periodic launch of devastating military campaigns over Gaza.

How did wars become an orderly configuration of the social and political relations characterising the Middle East? Despite many theoretical tools being used and offered, if one were to follow mainstream narratives, these ongoing realities of destruction must be considered as the result of local and internal grievances leading up to civil wars, bad governance, regional tribal and historical divisions, and so on. Interestingly, the more the US consolidated its unilateral hegemonic role in world affairs, the more those theories that most incisively had analysed the global order (Dependency, World-System and Marxian theories) were completely rendered obsolete, even as the weight of US-led imperialist policies (via sanctions, wars, and neoliberal reforms) unravelled over the region and the global South at large.⁶ Unfortunately, in doing so, such analyses have offered an abstract and too ahistorical picture of the reality on the ground, which fails to articulate the historical development and political trajectory of these countries vis-à-vis US-led imperialism. While dismissing, for so long, the weight of history that US-led imperialism has had on the entire world, the gradual economic rise of China has now brought scholars to talk about multiple imperialism(s). This move, as we will show, has only created further confusion. In this article, we set to explain the main limitations of these approaches and to recentre the study of the region in relation to the imperialist question, namely US-led imperialism.

Empiricism In, History Out

*The concept of an object cannot be properly formulated in idealism. Having once dismantled the world, idealists are unable to put it together again... It is as if one could not have soup anymore, but only its ingredients.*⁷

² Fadil Aliriza (2022) Food Shortages as Lenders "Suffocate" Tunisia, in *Meshkal*. Available online at: <https://meshkal.org/imf-tunisia-food-shortage-credit/>, accessed October 26, 2022.

³ Reuters (2022) Lebanon Records First Cholera Case since 1993. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/lebanon-records-first-cholera-case-since-1993-state-media-2022-10-06/>, accessed October 25, 2022.

⁴ Lin Biao (1965) Long Live the Victory of People's War! Available online at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1965/09/peoples_war/ch09.htm, accessed October 25, 2022.

⁵ Ray Bush (2022) Land and small farmer resistance in authoritarian Egypt, In: *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 23(1) pp. 1167–184.

⁶ Sam Moyo & Paris Yeros (eds) (2011) *Reclaiming the Nation: The Return of the National Question in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (New York: Pluto Press); Ilias Alami, Carolina Alves, Bruno Bonizzi, Annina Kaltenbrunner, Kai Koddenbrock, Ingrid Kvangraven, and Jeff Powell (2022) International Financial Subordination: A Critical Research Agenda, in *Review of International Political Economy*, Online First, pp. 1–27; Ingrid H. Kvangraven (2021) Beyond the Stereotype: Restating the Relevance of the Dependency Research Programme, in *Development and Change*, 52(1), pp. 76–112.

⁷ Kwame Nkrumah (1978) *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation* (London; Panaf), p. 23.

Academic and media narratives have impoverished our world by consigning the category of imperialism to history, and analyses of neoliberalism often have obscured the ongoing nature of imperialism in the world today. Mainstream accounts do so by neglecting history as a continuum of real events carried forth by a social subject. They reduce it into a Manichean vision of the world—i.e. the West versus the Rest, guided by the courageous-versus-evil actions of individuals, and then regurgitate it in the form of storytelling in chronological time. Wars appear as moments in time capturing the long-existing identity divides, sectarian or tribal, that—we are told—characterise the region. Depicting communities as being, more often than becoming, these accounts rely on ideal Weberian types divorced from concrete institutions and historical change. They trace timeless, ideal identities, and categories that focus on ideas of integration rather than conflicting interests. They resemble strikingly the normal-equilibrium schema of pre-Keynesian neoclassical economics; that is, they are logical constructs leaning heavily on a premise of built-in, timeless stability and integration of social reality, and in that they propose abstract, static, and ahistorical analyses. In doing so, whenever problematic aspects of society appear, namely wars that these conventional accounts aim to explain, they end up characterizing the region as an anomaly or an exception. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that regime-type categories, model-oriented IR, and neo-classical economic theories have not been able to deal with the question of war. As Renata Allio argues, if economic and sociological research faced historical reality, they would find it difficult to avoid the problem of war, because every historical period in the lifetime of each economist has experienced warlike conflict of a greater or lesser intensity with its major impact on the economy and in the mode of social reproduction.⁸

Another major problem relates to how the study of war as a social problem has become increasingly filled with superficial empiricism. In other words, while a wealth of factual ethnographic data, statistical correlations, and empirical generalisation has been accumulated on many aspects of these wars; associations between these tiny parts and the whole are still missing. A leading weakness in the field of IR, conflict/security, and area studies is its complete avoidance of, and its failure to discriminate, the more basic and controlling elements of the geopolitical system. That is, they fail to take into account how the historical development and political trajectory of the periphery—that is, countries of the global South—does not take place in a vacuum, but rather in a capitalist world-system.⁹ In this regard, we suggest that the study of wars would be advanced significantly by a more self-conscious theoretical integration of its empirical data, not only to deepen its insight into phenomena, but also to illuminate the possibilities of social control and remedial action.¹⁰ Such a theory clearly must be a theory of social change and, eventually, of the historical development of types of societies. And just as clearly it also must be a theory that views conflict and crisis as inherent in the changing social system rather than as external and accidental.

For instance, as per the cases of Libya and Syria in 2011, mainstream analyses paid hardly any attention to several conditions: the situation of these countries before the

⁸ Renata Allio (2021) *War in Economic Theories over Time: Assessing the True Economic, Social and Political Costs* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 245.

⁹ Samir Amin (1976) *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

¹⁰ Arthur K. Davis (1957) Social Theory and Social Problems, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 18(2), pp. 190–208.

war and the history behind it; and the class struggles at the local and international level. Rather, analysts attributed the political problems to the authoritarian, brutal, paranoid, and/or evil character of a single personality—that is, Bashar al-Assad or Mu'ammar Qaddafi. While the actions of individuals and their ideologies are important details that help to explain historical developments, they are not its over-determining elements. Individuals and ideologies are representatives of class interests that have become subordinated to the interests of the US-led imperialist system, thus linked inherently to the material reality that sustains their power. By ignoring these crucial political realities, accounts reduce politics and history to a grotesque fight between irrational individuals and dangerous ideologies, turning history into a treatise on teratology. The gist of that argument is that although the US and its European partners are imperialists, those regimes are fascists. Therefore, they rush to label anyone who attempts to problematize such narratives as supporters of authoritarian regimes. However, the point 'imperialism against fascism' functions as an imperialist class position meant to obliterate these countries by demonising their leadership. By disarticulating these social formations (and their gradual transformation) from the same US-led imperialist system,¹¹ they—willing or not—provide the ground for US-led imperialist invasions.

In the MENA region, as Samir Amin aptly noted in 2011, many of these ruling classes, defeated, largely have accepted their positions as subaltern allies of Western capital—that is, compradors. As the people crippled, engaged in the struggle for daily survival, they appear to accept their fate; or, even worse, nurture new illusions which these same ruling classes shower on them—with political Islam being the most dramatic example. Whereas these leaderships accepted the *diktat* of dollarized financial capital, thus becoming a comprador class, the possibility that NATO-launched wars could free a population of the South is particularly dangerous. As we aim to discuss further, such a position dismisses a fundamental component of the geopolitical system; that is, it fails to articulate how the increasing militarisation of the region is indicative of the central role that waste, wars, and militarism occupy in the US-led imperialist structure in the financial age. In other words, the heightening of social contradictions, whose emergence directly is articulated to the North via the imposition of sanctions¹² or bombings, within a country of the MENA region or the South at large cannot become a fertile ground for a NATO or US-led sponsored regime change.

For these reasons, it is important to point out that we use the concept of imperialism as a sociological phenomenon,¹³ as a system of social reproduction whose law of value¹⁴ determines the metabolic rate of capital—and thus social—reproduction

¹¹ See Matteo Capasso (2020) *The War and the Economy: The Gradual Destruction of Libya*, *Review of African Political Economy*, 47(166), pp. 545–567; Ali Kadri (2015) *Arab Development Denied: Dynamics of Accumulation by Wars of Encroachment* (London: Anthem Press) and Kadri (2019) *Imperialism with Reference to Syria* (Singapore: Springer).

¹² S. Davis & Immanuel Ness (eds) (2021) *Sanctions As War: Anti-Imperialist Perspectives on American Geo-Economic Strategy* (Leiden: Brill); Farwa Sial (2022) *Sanctions and the Changing World Order: Some Views from the Global South*, *Developing Economics*. Available at: <https://developingeconomics.org/2022/09/01/sanctions-and-the-changing-world-order-some-views-from-the-global-south/>, accessed October 26, 2022.

¹³ A. Abdel-Malek (1981) *Social Dialectics: Nation and Revolution* (Albany: SUNY Press).

¹⁴ Vladimir Lenin (1916) *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>, accessed October 25, 2022.

worldwide, and we refer to imperialism as the one exercised—using Samir Amin’s¹⁵ term—by the Triad, meaning: the US, Europe and Japan articulated to the comprador classes of the South. In other words, as Michael Parenti rightly argues, we reject this tendency among political scientists to use the term ‘empire or imperialism’ as to denote dominion and control with little attention given to the powerful economic interests that operate as the kernel behind US policy.¹⁶ Yet, the Leninist sociological imperialism, the historically specific monopoly-finance imperialism, differs from the economic accounts that speak of multiple imperialism(s)—in the plural form, such as the one offered by David Harvey.

Harvey, for instance, provides an empirical account of shifts in financial flows associated with super-exploitation.¹⁷ These flows amass in a capital stock which implants itself physically in the East, especially China. Growing Eastern infrastructure and other assets demonstrate a geographic tilt in global power and wealth favoring the East. His theory, as he says, is not a rigid imperialism with a ‘rigid geography of core and periphery set out in world systems theory’; it is rather ‘uneven geographical development, proliferating and differentiating divisions of labor, an understanding of global commodity chains and spatial fixes... and the construction and destruction of regional economies within which a certain ‘structural coherence’ (or ‘regional value regime’) might form for a time’.¹⁸ Such a teleological progression concludes in an empirical account, the ‘spatial fixes’, or the areas where capital builds its structures to absorb profits wrought by super-exploitation. The logical end-stage is that imperialism is too de-concentrated and decentralised to remain an imperialism.

However, the most important limitation of such a theory of imperialism lies in how spatial fixes literally are fixed in a hypothetical time. Space as an empirical abstraction is a thing that becomes a subject of other things and history: It erases the historical stage of imperialism by reification. Space determines a course of historical interaction. It imposes itself upon the mind as a subject independent from an ideologically formulated consciousness, which is the true subject that recasts its progress. Space and spatial fixes are magical disappearing acts in which the only thing that disappears is history as actualisation of dominant ideology or the real subject. In doing so, such a theory has important practical implications because, whereas there are more spatial fixes, one finds more mini-imperialisms (Chinese, Russian, Iranian, Brazilian, Venezuelan, etc.) or milder hegemonic variants thereof. The moment a subject, the specific capital, tinkers with the financial channels and the degree to which it centralises or concentrates some capital, a ‘new and improved’ theoretical concept of imperialism arises.

The notion that capital flows into ‘spatial fixes’ without considering the role of US military bases and its construal of dominant ideology as the isomorph of the dominant

¹⁵ Amin (2006) *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World* (Delhi: Aakar Books).

¹⁶ Michael Parenti (2011) *Face of Imperialism* (London: Routledge).

¹⁷ David Harvey (2018). Realities on the ground: David Harvey replies to John Smith. *Review of African Political Economy*. Available at <http://roape.net/2018/02/05/realitiesground-david-harvey-replies-john-smith/>. Accessed on October 25, 2022.

¹⁸ See David Harvey (2003) *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and (2018) Realities on the ground: David Harvey replies to John Smith. *Review of African Political Economy*. Available at <http://roape.net/2018/02/05/realitiesground-david-harvey-replies-john-smith/>. Accessed on October 25, 2022.

class, cannot remotely define or approximate imperialism and its implications. The issue of approximation hinges on whether the concept being approximated by some measure appertains to the object under consideration or is just capital's imaginary. When a concept is built through a sensuous perception formulated in still time and without a dynamic subject, this theory does not address nor approximate the condition under investigation, and so imperialism. The concept of 'money flows' stocking up in fixed capital independently of a historical subject laying out the grounds for policies to accumulate capital and re-siphon the wealth in dollar form is a one-sided abstraction or a partial truth meant to mystify history. The confluence of US military prowess, ideology, and the social form of its global hegemony is the subject whose characteristics define the historical period as imperialist or un-imperialist. That subject, the US-led imperialist class, is weakening as it faces off against China, which reshapes the imperialist subject as it exercises the sovereignty that retains and commands more of the wealth it has produced. However, this should not signal that the US is less or more imperialist or has ceased to be imperialist.

This is what happens when empirical observations are abstracted from history. Such enquiries posit that there are things outside consciousness and things inside consciousness as opposed to the dialectical practice of theory that follows the motion of the object reshaped by thought-exercised. Dialectical laws of thought¹⁹ capture instead the relation of thinking to actuality as the object—the thing outside us—develops through the subject's activity, or the shifting consciousness emerging from social being. By severing this process between theory and praxis via empiricism, Harvey's definition of imperialism has a very limited capacity to provide remedial action to present reality—meaning: the anti-imperialist struggle. In the Leninist approach, there is a social agency moulded by the developments of its historical circumstance, not just logical concepts assuming different degrees of intensity; there is a change in the social type of agency as it becomes the imperialist class. To Harvey, Lenin's sociological definition of imperialism, *the primacy of politics*,²⁰ the ideological underpinnings of the imperialist order that trail from centuries back, by which dominant capital reproduces as the leading social relationship, is missing. As such, the discussion hollows the concept of imperialism.

By proposing a theory that solely is based on a spatial dimension, Harvey treats space as an object that emerges outside of the weight of historical time, thus dismissing the centuries-long weight of Western material and ideological domination²¹ over most of the world, the South. This creates a situation where the geopolitical balance of forces is misrepresented, since its nature as a totality is sociological. One cannot understand imperialism as a divisible item or a sausage, so to say, but rather as a sociologically defined historical stage. Ultimately, the perception of power varies by class angle. To conceive of imperialism as a world system of economic-financial accumulation, uncentred and without a structure-subject at the helm, is an understanding

¹⁹ Karl Marx (1894) *Capital: A critique of political economy. The process of capitalist production as a whole* – Volume III (New York: International Publisher).

²⁰ Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

²¹ See, for instance, recent academic works that indicate how the numbers and brutality of massacres that the British empire carried out have outweighed the actions of the Third Reich. See Dylan Sullivan and Jason Hickel (2023) Capitalism and extreme poverty: A global analysis of real wages, human height, and mortality since the long 16th century, *World Development* 161, pp. 1-18; and Shashi Tharoor (2017) *Inglorious Empire: What the British did to India* (London: Hurst).

with which the conservatives would feel at ease. Such is a world in which demonstrators in a central metropolis of the US, such as New York, paying taxes to fund US military adventures, presume their social formation does not necessarily acquire surplus value by means of destruction. They postulate that their token activity, un-articulated with an opposing global power, sway capital away from its accumulation by waste production. Judging by the bloody trail of capital, far from achieving the desired results, their protests risk humanising imperialism and bestowing upon it a pseudo democratic guise. In un-centred imperialism, the US amasses the capital flight of the Globe not because of any fault of its own, but because the barbarians of the South, now hegemonic or mini-imperialists, are incapable of cohabitating or self-governing peacefully. The projection of capital as a rhizomic non-hierarchical world order without an imperialism is itself a tributary of dominant ideology that risks supporting the torrent of massacres and relative depopulation in the South.

To restate our hypothesis, imperialism is a set of material relations of exploitation between countries of the global North and South, which takes places through class collaboration. Unequal accumulation of value²² then depends more and more on the degree imperialist countries oppress and exploit developing countries. This entails, for instance, the use of military domination or policies that prevent developing countries from accessing technological resources or harnessing their internal resources for the purpose of regional or popular development.²³ This historically-established unequal accumulation of value does not only entail the pile of commodities, natural resources, and their corresponding ideas. It also consists of the pile of dead bodies and destruction of nature that is produced through the process of accumulation and extraction of capital. What distinguishes US-led imperialism in the financial age is its unique appetite for war and destruction. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the role that accumulation by waste has played in the US-led imperialist age.

Militarism, War and Waste: Predicates of US-Led Imperialism

*As far as business is concerned, pentagonism is man's most fabulous invention and necessarily came into being in the capitalist countries par excellence—the countries of overdeveloped capitalism—since it was there that the capacity for accumulating overprofit was placed at the top of the scale of social values.*²⁴

War is not an anomaly but a social process that naturally fulfils the needs of capital, being a form of production and grounding for reproduction. Yet, as mentioned above, mainstream accounts often explain wars as outside the circuits of capital, which are the flows through which capital produces surplus value, in the forms of money and commodities.²⁵ They buttress the dominant US-led imperialist order by exempting its basic institutions and laws from dynamic and critical analysis and by deflecting

²² Arghiri Emmanuel (1972) *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

²³ Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik (2016) *A Theory of Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press).

²⁴ Juan Bosch (1968) *Pentagonism, a Substitute for Imperialism* (New York: Grove Press), p. 28.

²⁵ Karl Marx (1992) [1893]. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 2: The Process of Circulation of Capital* (New York: Penguin).

scientific attention into harmless areas that may or may not serve the vested interests, but at least do not challenge them. The connection between wars and processes of domination and capital accumulation either is denied or loosely explained as an inherent disposition of all empires.

Just like other industries, war profits originate in the making of surplus value.²⁶ They stem from the value of the many hours of surplus labour condensed and consumed in a very short chronological time span. Because war financing is state funded, the profits of war are also the profits of finance. Imperialism mobilises the moneyed monopoly surpluses or what amounts to the excessive tradable claims to wealth to resolve the pressure that fictitious capital, the vastly inflated asset value, builds upon economic activity. For Lenin, the frequency of financial-instrument issuance in fact augurs war. War absorbs excess money and turns it into sovereign debt. It also requires financing and the expansion of financial debts triggers fiat money growth and financialisation.²⁷ The growing clout of the imperialist power derived, in addition to the spoils of wars, underwrites the newly minted or electronically emitted credit.

In Lenin's periodisation of imperialism,²⁸ in setting it as a historical phase, the rate of exploitation must respond to economic expansion in scope and scale, the concentration and centralisation of capital and the swings of the financial crisis characterising the monopoly age. For this comprehension of imperialism as an intensification of the practice of the law of value to become categorical, to become rooted in the categories of historical materialism, tracking the development of the changing concept, imperialism, in relation to its changing historical foundations requires a re-qualification of the financial impetus for wars as it develops in the twentieth century. Lenin's explanation is that as finance capital heightens the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, war as means to resolve that contradiction becomes, more so than ever, the mechanism for the advancement of capital's interests. Projecting Lenin's logic upon modern times, it is the concentration and centralisation of capital in terms of financial assets and structure of power, which lead to the transition phase where surplus value from longer working hours in super-exploitative conditions plays a much lesser role in redressing the crisis than the waste, militarism, and war-related accumulation. Only the *smelting of man and nature* in war, the depopulation, at times the liquidation of practically all the culturally resisting population of the dominated country,²⁹ the reduction of human beings to their labour power, would contribute a higher rate of surplus value under monopoly finance capital. Such a process is ongoing.

For the US-led imperialist class, war is a win-win situation. It is itself a market and an industry, more appropriately, a sphere of production. In addition to the usual trap-pings of an industry, it has the additional quality of transmuting some of its concrete labour into abstract labour without appearing that it does so through the deliberation of the markets for exchange. In deaths attributed to war, it acutely compresses or shortens longevity to meet the requisites of social time, capital-commanded time, as in forcing people to sacrifice much effort, including the sacrifice of one's own life, in very short

²⁶ Karl Marx (1867) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1: The Process of Production of Capital*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers).

²⁷ Michael Hudson (2003) *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance*, 2nd edition (London: Pluto Press).

²⁸ Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

²⁹ Amílcar Cabral (1970) *National Liberation and Culture*. Available at: <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/cabralnlac.html>, Accessed October 25, 2022.

period. Unlike the mild violence of the civilian-end use commodity labour-process, the demands of the law of value for the type of socially necessary labour time required for production as pure waste, the product of war, are delivered by the violence of war. In other words, it is the explosion of bombs—their related killing of humans and waste of the planet—that functions as both ends and means. Logically and absurdly, if war kills everyone, there would be none left to perform concrete labour. Nonetheless, war and its ensuing austerity depopulates to resolve the underutilisation of human resources attendant upon overproduction.

Overproduction may be an absolute oversupply of commodities, but it need not be considered that all the time. Production is a social process that matures under the command of capital. It meets the demands of a given market. A glut in the salient economic sense occurs when commodities are overproduced in relation to the class that cannot fully afford what is being produced. The concept of overproduction extends economic glut because on average the anarchy of capital, a social process, permanently overproduces for all markets irrespective of the going price. As a social process, overproduction always takes place in relation to a respective market, which through the power of its sponsoring capital disengages the resources of other markets that could potentially threaten its expansion. Overproducing capital arrests the expansion of competing capitals, especially in the developing world, by the most egregious means. To do so, it must regiment the labour process or cheapen and discipline labour engaged in production. To cheapen not only the wage paid but all the health, education, and other costs of labour reproduction over society's lifecycle. To reduce the labor costs or necessary labor and indulge in measures that set the rate of labor's reproduction, the wage bill and other costs must fall by reducing the average wage or the number of laborers.

At this point, for US-led imperialism, wrecking (not just containing) a nation not fully submissive to its policies provides that supplementary dose of power that strengthens its hold over the area and, by implication, far afield. War consumes/realises military materiel, nature, and people. It is itself waste and it is central to the broader category of accumulation by waste, which is the predominant activity of the US-led imperialist age. In other words, since war is production by destruction, the more war destroys, the more war produces. Workers' lives are inputs into war as production, and the number of dead bodies, the wasted lives and annihilated natural species, are the partial products of that industry. Imperialism is the violent facet of capital, which accumulates by destruction, the wasting of social nature or by relative and absolute depopulation; that is, the banishment of the social support mechanisms required for the reproduction of the population.

Therefore, of the totality that is the waste category, militarism is a predicate of capital's system—capital ceases without it—and it is financially significant. US-led imperialism floods the world with its dollars, imposes them as the surrogate but leading currency for all imperialised nations, issues bonds to underwrite, absorb and redeploy the monopoly-accumulated moneyed surplus.³⁰ The bonds/T-bills expand the assets of the financial sector and its capacity to lend and further expand the money supply, and financial profits. The private sector free rides on the war-economy tech-innovation,³¹ or as the state invests in the military and leaves more of social spending, health care

³⁰ Hudson, *Super Imperialism*.

³¹ Heidi Peltier (2021) 'Arms, Tanks, and Munitions: The Relationship between Profits and Monopoly Conditions,' *Security in Context Working Paper* No. 1. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tZFniJzCz6woNbL9_SrVuX8eWiN_Rg8P/view, Accessed October 25, 2022.

or education, to the private sector. At a foundational social level, militarism is key to the resilience of capital because it engages the demobilised value inherent in human lives. Every living human is a productive laborer because the work she performs is the act of dying under a bomb or austerity for a price. Militarism reduces the relative numbers of the population and strips the communal will of working people by undermining their potential or actual forms of social organisation. It is the engine of surplus value because it divides, lowers the longevity of those living within a social turnover cycle, and lessens the overall share of the working class, its necessary labor, from the total social product.

At the same time, it is crucial to grasp that militarism is a more wide-ranging concept than the accounting framework of the military-industrial complex, as formulated by Eisenhower, which ‘appropriates and dissipates apparently limitless resources and over-produced capital funds’.³² The truth is that the notion of the military-industrial complex imprecisely draws the web of relations that mix and merge the bourgeois state, industrial corporations, finance capital and the military bureaucracy into a single mechanism of imperialist power.³³ The multiple interrelationships that are intended to be identified with the term military-industrial complex can only be clarified from a dialectical angle, within the context of comprehensive studies on the structure of power.³⁴ The essence of this ‘complex’ of interests includes the military industry, scientists, think tanks (universities, research institutions), businessmen, media outlets, and members of Congress,³⁵ which is something that US President, Dwight Eisenhower, could not directly express in his statement. Consequently, when referring to the military-industrial complex, Eisenhower’s paternalistic appraisal of the development of the military factor and its ‘dangers’ are raised only at the phenomenal level. In other words, while this phenomenon is acknowledged as ‘new’ in North American society, it is still interpreted in a circumstantial and subjective dimension, as a process that can be eliminated through the rigorous control of state and administrative management, regardless of its historical determination, meaning: an inherent feature of contemporary imperialism. Basically, it is conceived as a superstructure that emerges ‘outside’ the institutional limits of the capitalist state.

However, wasting of human lives, not only the potential but the actual human, is a domain of accumulation and a process of production in which depopulation is inherent in the motion of capital. War is an economic activity that falls under the larger rubric of accumulation by waste. It exploits labour and emits surplus value. In the case of war, value is not just the thing being produced, the dead body or waste; it is a relation of subject to object; the things workers produce (objects) and the workers themselves organised in classes or strata (subjects). Just as all other commodities, the value of war products has substance or is a unity of the thing being produced with the forms of organisation and consciousness codetermining its production. That is, wars—in the process of killing people and pollute the environment, thus continuing to kill people—reconfigure the organization of countries of the South, they destroy their national and

³² Ivan Mészáros (1995) *Beyond capital: Toward a theory of transition* (NY: Monthly Review Press).

³³ Jorge Hernandez Martinez (2011) ‘Imperialismo/Pentagonismo – La sociedad norteamericana 42 anos despues’ [Imperialism/Pentagonism - North american society after 42 years] in: Luis Cespedes Espinosa (ed.) *El Pentagonismo: 42 anos despues* [Pentagonism: 42 years after] (Santo Domingo: Fundacion Global Democracia y Desarrollo), pp. 18-40.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁵ Christian Sorensen (2020) *Understanding the War Industry* (Atlanta: Clarity Press).

regional unity. In doing so, they make sure that any forms of political organisation and/or ideological consciousness required to challenge the power of US-led imperialism is put to rest. Thus, it is not simply the bombs and the financial spin offs that underlie accumulation by destruction, the rationale entails the continuous onslaught of the national sovereignty, and regional unity, of the global South.

In such a process, the planet also is devoured for the sake of capital, and thus the luxury of the few. It is not the physical limit of resource-use that is coming to an end, it is rather the capital relationship, which reproduces human/social nature by the disproportional disposal of human and nature. The depletion of resources, even if it does not materialise, it is constructed socially to foster scarcity, which acts as a repository for price differentials. Scarce commodities, including clean nature, become affordable by the rich and inaccessible to the poor. For example, the destruction of distributary waterpipes, the contamination of water, and the rise of plastic bottled water industries make safer water only available for those who could pay. Whether real or fabricated, scarcity boosts profits and, as such, potentially/actually exhausted resources cannot convince capital to alter its mindset regarding the wasting of social nature. This also sheds light on the limitations that concepts like 'resource wars' have, as they disregard the logic of capital in producing and feeding off manufactured scarcity, waste, and actual killing.

The waste industry has reduced the price of consumables of the Northern classes, lowering necessary labour, for nearly five colonial and imperialist centuries. Slavery, the genocides of the natives, and the debauchery of natural species are not killing for sports, they are the novel forms of commercial exploitation or the 'pedestal' of Northern wage slavery.³⁶ Human and nature are commodified, and they are produced and consumed depending on the rate of accumulation over a social production cycle. As commodities, they are not realised before or after the sale of a run of the mill commodity, like cars or bombs. They are realised or absorbed by the market and priced in social time, or the time into which capital disciplines people to produce with least costs or with costs transferred onto society. Social or abstract time oppresses private or concrete time because it crushes people for profit making. Waste plays out in the background of production or simultaneously as a precursor and an offshoot of production. Social time is not similar to chronological or sequentially ordered time. It is not that something happens in the past to influence the future with a given probability and a given lag. Social time is the time that depends on the qualitatively changing nature of the social forces that shape events. It is not only incoherent with chronological time, but also different. It is the changing quality of the social forces reflected in production time. More appropriately defined, because of its indeterminate causality, it is the time projection of historical overdetermination upon life processes.

The waste events are cross-determining throughout the path of time. Assimilated in thought, the past of waste as well as its future are precepts, independent of chronological time, which shape development in the chronological time designated to meet capital demands. Under capital, social time squeezes the lives of people in short chronological time-lapses. Under labour or as the working class frees itself from time-constraints of capital, it becomes the time in which what happens in a day equals what happens in generations (paraphrasing Lenin). Social time is the quality of life

³⁶ Marx, *Capital: A critique of political economy*.

experienced as real time or the time in which the analytical breakdown of cause and effect assumes its dialectical unity as overdetermined immediacy. Colloquially, the event of waste has happened because of many interrelated past and future causes and/or effects that have given birth to it.

However, this consumption of human and nature by capital, in the case of human way before their historically-established time, is an internality to capital, as opposed to the ludicrous concept of externality. Negative externality exemplified in the natural disaster and the extinction of irreplaceable species, trump all other products of capital. Although Marx posited that humanity will not give itself more problems than it could solve, the opposite is now true. Externality is logically or formally true, but realistically or operationally false. As a concept, it is an anti-working-class weapon, just as every other concept of the mainstream. The conventional approach splits an un-splitable production process into waste and non-waste components, and then treats each apart. As such, it obviates the fact that capital must cheapen inputs, and thus it has to neutralize the working class, hijack its resources, and use them irresponsibly for the cheapest cost, emitting more waste than something of social use. Because production is an alienating process, socially unaccountable measures of technological development and production whitewash nearly all progress experienced under capital. Even, the momentary social gains of the welfare state in the North are in part the bribes to a working class that combats the rise of communism and national liberation movements in the South.

Yet, in typical racist cant, the prolocutors of Western civilisation never cease to remind the planet that without their discoveries, life expectancy would have been much lower than that which prevails. Indeed, if Africans and Arabs seem to live longer, it is not because of Western humanism. It so happens that in one scenario the drugs for malaria were initially developed to treat bovine parasitic diseases in British dairy farms fortuitously helped human victims elsewhere. Argumentatively, capital shortens life to earlier than one could live under the available capacity; however, capital's self-exculpation is that without European civilisation, people would have died at 20 years of age in the jungles or deserts. It is absurd to compare someone dying from poverty and depleted uranium exposure in Fallujah at the age of say 43, and at the same time, say she should be happy, because in Sumerian or Neolithic times, she would have at best lived to 23 years. Time is of fluctuating quality or conditioned by the set of social relations determining its structure within a given period. If one wants to compare the development of different historical periods along chronological time, this requires qualification and periodisation to attenuate the arbitrariness. In any case, irreversible time does not easily lend itself to measurement, not because of the non/stationarity of the mainstream (data that does not change much over time), but because of shifts in its content emerging in the prevailing phenomenon, which call for a re-periodisation of history.

Missing in this trope not only is that peripheral development must be capped to become a feeder to central development,³⁷ but also the fact that the slaughter of the South always has been the prime industry of capital since the 14th century. This Western culture, the culture of capital, whose stock of knowledge erected by imperialist aggression and wrought wealth, is such that few analysts venture beyond the

³⁷ Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange*.

lifebuoy ethic to ask, how can US-led imperialism and bombardment of Yemen bring its life expectancy to 30 or 40 years lower than Europe's? It is this sort of cultural massacre that insemminates defeatism in the developing world and to which Amílcar Cabral replied by emphasising the prioritisation of the cultural struggle.

Thus, ecological imperialism biasedly sickens the masses of the South. 'The richest one percent of the world's population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity during a critical 25-year period of unprecedented emissions growth'.³⁸ The assault on nature is doubly favourable to capital because working class power regulates the price of nature in favour of labour, while a nature used for low prices and abused, such that it becomes a dying nature, reduces the cost of labour reproduction because it terminates labour's life earlier. Waste is a mutually assured weapon of mass destruction.

For these reasons, at the political level, the most immediate challenge is to understand how crucial Washington's accumulation by waste to the subordination of the rest of the world is. As Amin points out, the defeat of this project is 'the inescapable condition to open up the necessary margin of freedom, without which any social and democratic progress, and any advance towards a multipolar world, will remain extremely vulnerable'.³⁹ On a conceptual level, it is important to point out that the role of waste and militarism in the maintenance of US-led imperialism was, in various degrees, always diagnosed by attentive scholars and politicians in the South of the world, as they experienced first-hand the weight of US imperialism on their country's path to decolonization and independence. However, as we mentioned above, the richness of this theoretical work has been progressively rendered obsolete by Northern academics, as the US consolidated its unilateral hegemonic role in world affairs.

While there has been a revitalization to study these dynamics in the face of US-led permanent destruction,⁴⁰ it is more imperative than ever to read the insights provided by older texts that diagnosed the imperial wrath on the South. In 1966, for instance, the former president of the Dominican Republic and very close friend of Fidel Castro, Juan Bosch, published a lengthy essay titled '*Pentagonismo: sustituto del imperialismo*.' As an acute observer of world affairs, Bosch argued that 'Pentagonism is undoubtedly a threat to all the peoples of the world because it is a war machine that needs war as living creatures need air and food if they are not to perish'.⁴¹ What is most striking about Bosch's line of thought is how he already called out the dangers of pentagonism for the working masses of the North: 'But the threat is no less great for all Americans. If the power of pentagonism continues to grow and comes to dominate the sphere of civilian power inside the United States, the whole country—and not just politicians and military leaders—will in the end provoke the wrath of the whole

³⁸ Oxfam (2020) Carbon Emissions of Richest 1 Percent More than Double the Emissions of the Poorest Half of Humanity, *Oxfam International*. Available at <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/carbon-emissions-richest-1-percent-more-double-emissions-poorest-half-humanity>, accessed October 25, 2022.

³⁹ Samir Amin (2011) 'National States: Which Way Forward?' in S. Moyo and P. Yeros (eds.) *Reclaiming the Nation: The Return of the National Question in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Pluto Press), p. 343.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Andrew Bacevich (2016) *America's War for the Greater Middle East* (New York: Penguin); and Neta C. Crawford (2019) *Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War*. Costs of War (Watson Institute: Brown University). Available online at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/ClimateChangeandCostofWar> accessed April 4, 2022.

⁴¹ Bosch, *Pentagonism, a Substitute for Imperialism*, 131.

world'.⁴² For much of Western-based produced theory, this is the heart of the problem that is conveniently ignored or hidden. While there is a strong readiness to denounce fascism and authoritarianism in any other circumstance and to throw it on the shoulders of their opponents, they ignore how history trickled down in the forms of bombings, massacres, and sanctions for that majority of the world that the West subjugated.⁴³

To understand the law of value that commands US-led imperialist expansion is thus fundamental for two main reasons: first, it is in the Western part of the world that the harshest system of power relations developed, often relying on slavery and genocide of entire populations, such as the US;⁴⁴ and second, to undergo such brutal policies has *de facto* been the majority of the world.⁴⁵ As to the imperialist wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen and others, it is often carried out by the alibi of the Hollywood-like evil leader. While US-led imperialism promotes and funds reactionary jihadists, empowers sectarianism, and incapacitates the state, it lays the foundation for continuous war. However, historical agency is neither that of an evil leader nor of the trans-historical psychological traits and inclinations of a clump of individuals. The abstract (metaphysical abstract) or isolated subject cannot exist. The individual is a social relationship reflecting the many social relationships of the social order, of which only the relationships organised to produce a political impact by means of organised political action count as agency. The agency of the masses confronting imperialism faded with the disintegrating state. Facing the resultant vector of colonialism and imperialist class power, a nation state is its own to the degree it engages successfully in anti-imperialist struggle. Defined as such, an anti-imperialist developing nation is not a failed state, no matter the physical ruin. The state as the institution that mediates the disparate interests of the proletarian class and global capital, as per Meszaros,⁴⁶ stands or fails not by the loss of territory in anti-imperialist wars, but by its servility to imperialism.⁴⁷

Overall, it should be clear to everybody that overcoming imperialism will only be possible if the Western hemisphere recovers the relationship with the colonial plundering and, most importantly, the anti-colonial revolution, reintroducing the weight of these events in the historical balance of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ For those thinking that 'after all there must be two sides to everything,' there is no balance sheet to be drawn on the effects of colonialism and imperialism in the region. Paraphrasing Walter Rodney,⁴⁹ US-led imperialism has only one hand: it is a one-armed bandit.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Stefano Azzarà (2022) *Dov'è Il Fascismo Oggi? Processi Di Concentrazione Neoliberale Del Potere, Stato d'eccezione e Ricolonizzazione Del Mondo* [Where is fascism today? Processes of neoliberal concentration of power, state of exception and recolonization of the world], *Marxismo Oggi online*. Available at <https://www.marxismo-oggi.it/saggi-e-contributi/saggi/545-dov-e-il-fascismo-oggi-processi-di-concentrazione-neoliberaledel-potere-stato-d-eccezione-e-ricolonizzazione-del-mondo>, accessed October 25, 2022.

⁴⁴ David E. Stannard (1993) *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁵ Domenico Losurdo (2017) *Il marxismo occidentale. Come nacque, come morì, come può rinascere* [Western marxism: How it was born, how it died, how it can be reborn] (Bari: Laterza).

⁴⁶ István Mészáros (2007) The only viable economy. In: *Monthly Review*, 58(11). Available online at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2007/04/01/the-only-viable-economy/>, accessed October 25, 2022.

⁴⁷ Kadri, *Arab Development Denied*.

⁴⁸ Tricontinental Institute for Social Research & Casa de las Américas (2022) Ten Theses on Marxism and Decolonisation, *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*. Available online at: <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-ten-theses-on-marxism-and-decolonisation/>, accessed October 26, 2022.

In this spirit, we move to discuss how the analytical contribution of each article interacts with the question of imperialism in the Middle East.

Conclusion: Recentring the Imperialist Question

The Special Issue opens with two articles on the new strategies that imperialist forces adopted to control Tunisia. The first article by Corinna Mullin, titled '*The 'war on terror' as primitive accumulation in Tunisia: US-led imperialism and the post-2010–2011 revolt security conjuncture*', draws on the Marxian concept of conjuncture, and explores how the US-led War on Terror has provided the grounds for Tunisia's financial integration in the aftermath of 2010 revolt and the 2015 Bardo attacks. Her analysis highlights the need for an expansive and interdisciplinary approach to undo the dichotomy militarism/finance, pinpointing the existence of what she calls *security dependency* between Tunisia and US-led imperialism. The increasing securitization of the social-economic order not only has deepened the relation of dependency, but it also provided the local ruling classes with better means to control the lower ones, disciplining and pauperising them. In other words, war, militarism, and security assistance are taking centre stage as the North tries to maintain its grip on the extraction and accumulation of value from Tunisia.

The following article by Mustapha Jouili, '*Imperialism and Neoliberal Redeployment in Post-uprising Tunisia*', also traces how imperialist forces hijacked the Tunisian uprising. The author identifies two main strategies—the use of financial aid and military assistance—that were followed to secure Tunisia's subordinate integration into the neoliberal economy, what he calls an orderly transition. Without breaking away from past neoliberal policies, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the EU continue to lock Tunisia in a cycle of debt and financial subordination, with the active support of the ruling classes. On par with Mullin's argument, the article also explores how security assistance intensified in the aftermath of US' military defeat in Syria, and the destruction of neighbouring Libya, particularly in the field of migration. In doing so, the imperialist forces were able to hijack the popular uprising and direct it towards an 'orderly transition' thereby aggravating the process of social polarization. However, as much as US-led imperialism rearticulates, so do the struggles of popular masses. Mullin concludes highlighting how the Tunisian working masses have shown a capacity to mobilize against the imperialist security state and the numerous forms of extraction, exploitation, exclusion, and dispossession that it is designed to enable and protect. The rising protests in extractive and militarized zones, such as Gafsa and El Kamour, indicate that there is a strong popular will to imagine and struggle towards an alternative to the colonial-capitalist model of development that is predicated on profound inequality and has required the forfeiting of Tunisia's sovereignty from its inception.

The third article by Patrick Higgins, '*Gunning for Damascus: The US War on the Syrian Arab Republic*', analyzes the long war that the US has waged over Syria since 1961. The significance of this piece lies in recentring the historical and contemporary role of US-led imperialism when analysing the ensuing destruction that Syria experienced after 2011. Through a perusal of archival sources, reports and media, Higgins tells us a story of a global structure under US-led hegemony bent on undermining any post-colonial attempt to achieve regional independence, especially the liberation of

⁴⁸ Walter Rodney (2018) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso Books).

Palestine. In such a scenario, the 2011 events cannot simply be understood as a popular uprising, but they require to be assessed considering the author's analysis of the covert nature of the US-led war destabilizing and weakening Syria as a social and cultural entity. The findings reveal that, as much Israel played a unique role, arming proxies and carrying out bombings in Syria, so the destruction of Syria requires centring the the Palestinian struggle for liberation as a crucial site of anti-imperialist struggle in the region.

The fourth article by Nina Farnia, titled '*The Iranian-American Intelligentsia in U.S. Foreign Affairs: Ahistoricism, Anti-Structuralism, and the Production of Idealism*', recentres the imperialist question to gauge the status of Iranian studies in US academia. Farnia shows how Iranian American intellectuals have lost the intellectual courage required to act as intellectuals, speaking truth to power, and instead have become 'functionaries' of the US-led imperialist structure. Focusing on studies that appeared in the aftermath of the fortieth anniversary of the Iranian Revolution in 2019, she argues that the field remains dominated by ahistorical analyses. In particular, she denounces how, despite the insistence on studying such a remarkable event in the history of post-colonial politics through a global lens, the category of imperialism has vanished from the intellectual vocabulary of the Iranian-American intelligentsia.

The fifth article by Max Ajl, titled '*Logics of Elimination and Settler Colonialism: Decolonization or National Liberation?*' recentres the imperialist question to reassess the conceptual weight of the growing field of settler-colonial studies and one of its founding scholars, Patrick Wolfe. Ajl's thesis is both very simple and powerful: Wolfe's opus has watered down the conceptual category of imperialism and, in doing so, ended up offering both problematic analytical and pragmatic insights when applied to the case of the Zionist colonization of Palestine. The article demonstrates at length that Wolfe's predilection to explain settler colonialism as the result of racial constructs, largely devoid of any class component, has turned settler-colonialism into an encompassing category, applied casually to any possible context, yet losing its analytical and pragmatic value. In other words, by renouncing a structural understanding of US-led imperialism, Wolfe's focus turned on questions of identity and race. When applied to Palestine, Ajl argues that these insights obscure—rather than clarify—the type of regional solidarities and political meanings associated with the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

The Special Issue ends with the article by Linda Matar and Ali Kadri, '*China Confronts US imperialism in the Arabian Sea: The Case of Oman*'. This article draws on the case of Oman to show the increasing threat that the Chinese model of development poses to US-led imperialism. Debunking mainstream narratives that present China as an exploitative geopolitical actor encroaching on global South countries, the authors offer instead an analytical grounded picture that tells otherwise. When China began promising and concluding agreements that stipulated the construction of large infrastructural investment in Oman, allowing the latter to diversify its economy, the US rushed to stop cold these negotiations. In such a case, it is important to recentre the imperialist question because it shows that, from a developmental standpoint, Chinese productive capacity in the host country is anathema to US-led imperialism. The US must keep the Gulf countries as dependent non-sovereign states if its power is not to be challenged, especially in the MENA region. This last piece is also a reminder that, from those who are committed to recovering the relationship with the world anti-colonial revolution—as discussed above, it is reasonable to expect that they will look

sympathetically not only at the struggle of the Palestinian people, still forced to fight against a classic form of settler-colonialism, but also to the countries that have an anti-colonial revolution behind them and that are now struggling to undo their condition of dependence (economic and technological) from imperialist powers, i.e. the People's Republic of China.

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