

Filip Ilkowski

Capitalist Imperialism in Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks



PETER LANG
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Translated by Matthew La Fontaine



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Introduction

Let us begin by briefly elaborating the definition of the term “capitalist imperialism” as it is understood by the author of this book¹. The question of imperialism *in its broadest sense* is identical with the issue of state expansionism, itself manifested in various ways. The very concept of *imperium* (the Latin word for “rule”, in English: empire) comes from ancient Rome and initially addressed the territorial scope of authority wielded by Roman civil servants. With time it acquired the meaning of the expansive, hierarchical, and universal whole of the Roman Empire intended to keep the peace. The *Imperium* thus existed in the singular. This was, in a certain sense, the elaboration of the Greek concept of *hegemony*, indicating leadership exercised by one state over others, voluntarily submitting to this arrangement for their own good. In contrast, *imperialism* – a concept which appeared in the context of the competition among expansionist states at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – is associated with the *multiplicity* of states adopting an imperial disposition understood as the expansion of their authority, as well as in the *coercion* that exists and results to some degree from the presence of subordination. It therefore concerns the activities of states whose relations with one another are characterized by conflict; more broadly speaking, and considering what was of particular importance during the period of colonial conquest, those states’ activities directed towards *countries* which did not necessarily constitute independent nation-states. In this sense, imperialism encompasses all actions of states (political, economic, cultural) intended to strengthen their relative position *at the cost of other states/countries*. Imperialism is thus not the same thing as colonialism understood as the formal conquest of territory. Colonialism is only one manifestation of imperialism. It also need not necessarily take the form of a zero-sum game. Generally, under capitalism, a system consisting in the expanded reproduction of capital, it is not: this is why emphasis is placed on the relative nature of that reinforcement. Nevertheless, the concept of imperialism assumes the occurrence of conflict, and the drive to shape the relations among states to reflect the interests of their individual actors.

1 The book is an English translation of a fragment of the Polish book titled “Capitalist Imperialism in Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks” (Warsaw, 2015). It is composed of the second part of the Polish original, slightly modified and titled “The Newest Theories of Capitalist Imperialism”, along with a summary and a fragment of the introduction.

This broadest definition, however, is far from sufficient as regards attempts to explain the dynamics of imperialism in a specific form. It may suggest the error of an ahistorical assignment of permanent imperialist leanings of states *as such*, rather than explanations for those tendencies consisting in the rooting of states in specific social relations. Let us therefore emphasize that the foundation of imperialism is *not* the eternal or fundamental superpower aspiration of states; in essence, the contrary thesis would invoke reference to the sphere of metaphysics. The adjective *capitalist* is therefore necessary for the substantiation of imperialism in its form associated with the existence of states in a system characterized by the competitive accumulation of capital. In other words, of states acting within the framework of *capitalism* as a system of social relations defined by that competitive accumulation. Capital is understood here following the view of Karl Marx as a superficially “self-multiplying” value which is at once an expression of relations based on the exploitation of hired labour and on competition leading to the necessity of its infinite multiplication. The all-encompassing dynamics of capitalism that result from it are essential in understanding contemporary imperialism. The driving force behind the shifting balance of power among contemporary states is their embedding in the competitive and expansionist nature of capitalism. *The ultimate measure of success of the capitalist state is its effectiveness in accumulating capital within its own borders* – usually measured by indicators of “economic growth”.

The fact that the drive towards multiplication of capital is possessed of an increasingly global character, and accumulation of individual capitals cross those borders, does not reduce the role of capitalist states in the global competition. What makes states specifically capitalist states is their complex role in organizing the processes of capitalist development within a specified territory. This also determines the particular nature of their competition, based on the drive for relative effectiveness of that growth. Historically speaking, a fully-formed capitalist imperialism could only have come about following the moment of formation of a global junction of both states and non-state capital entities, within the framework of a global market. It was only then that a complete system emerged in which states could use the tools at their disposal for the express purpose of relative improvement in the effectiveness of their “own” accumulation of capital. Capitalist imperialism is thus also a system arising at a specific stage in the development of global capitalism. There is a close connection between the perception of capitalist imperialism as a *system of competing capitalist states* and its perception as a *phase of capitalist development*. Individual capitals operating on an international scale do not stop being associated with states. Both exporting and “attracting” capital can play an important role in strategies pursued with the hope of its successful accumulation. Also, the fact that the results of the very

processes generated by competition leads us to increasingly large units of capital only *reinforces* the interdependency and direct links of states and non-state capital entities in the global system. Capitalist states are dependent on the accumulation of capital: they impose order on its process, participate in it both directly and indirectly, and they seek effective methods of conducting that process in relation to other capitalist states as well. They are not merely simple tools in the hands of private capitals. In conjunction with a formal monopoly on the application of organized forms of violence in both internal and external relations, based on legal and ideological legitimacy, this renders capitalist states real subjects of imperial capitalism as a systemic totality.

At the same time, the dynamics of the accumulation of capital by particular players in the game is not equal across the board, and thus their place in the system may at all times change, and is always open to challenge. States of an above-average level of capitalist development aspire to playing a greater role than that which was given to them in the preceding period. In turn, those which are relatively weaker in economic terms desire to retain their previous political position. What is more, both groups may employ military force in order to achieve their aspirations. This is the backdrop for various political strategies, ideologies, and means of using their armed forces. Even those ideologies farthest removed from the banal vision of capitalist economic life grounded in the myth of harmonious buying-and-selling, supplying a superficial rationality to the expansion of states within the confines of that system, have failed to free themselves from that dependency. Even the genocidal and racist utopia of the “Thousand Year Reich” was judged on its effectiveness in overcoming social and economic crisis in order to return to economic expansion by way of an extreme program of war and colonization.

The adopted strategy of argumentation requires only a very limited exploration of the complex issue of the relationship between culture and imperialism, at times presented in the form of the misleading phrase “cultural imperialism”. However, there is no way to avoid the issue of ideology, which can be acknowledged as remaining in association with a broad understanding of “culture”. The ideology accompanying capitalist imperialism is primarily revealed in various mutation of presenting one’s own expansion as the struggle of “civilization” with “savagery”. It can manifest itself in an openly racist form, but also a more sublimated one. Historically, the invocation of military force by capitalist states has been accompanied not only by ideas of “race war” (as in the years of colonization characterizing the end of the 19th century, then transferred to the interior of Europe by the Nazis), but also by universalist slogans like “the struggle against slavery” (at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries) or “protecting human rights” (at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries). In this context the actions of one or a group of states,

usually the most economically and militarily powerful, have been presented not as serving to advance their own interests (ultimately the interest of accumulating capital within their own borders), but rather as being undertaken for the good of all humanity. This superficial universalism is frequently linked with an ideological presentation of an oecumenical, cohesive, and uniform culture serving as a model and a norm, transcending not only existing regional differences, but also the cultural *class* gap within states. Yet here the competition among capitalist states always involves the promotion of their own image of stability and “modernity”, which is also associated with a place in the hierarchy of symbolic cultural attractiveness. Paradoxically, this may lead to the promotion of mythologized “native” cultural models, as both a strategy for competition in the symbolic field and for the papering over of internal differences within a given state.

In short, we may summarize by saying that contemporary capitalist states compete to reinforce the accumulation of capital within their own borders as part of competition on a global market becoming ever more integrated as a result of the processes of capitalist development. This is clearly visible in the relations of economics with geopolitics (understood as the global rivalry of states) of the global system in its newest form. Such states, recording relatively rapid economic growth like China and India, aspire for their political role to reflect their new place in the framework of the global economy. This is the source of the pressure to replace summits gathering the traditional economies of the European world (i.e. Europe and states created through colonization by European settlers) in the G8 group with broader G20 summits, including the leading developing economies of the Global South; of the aspiration to play a greater role in such forums as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization; the drive by India and Brazil to become permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, etc. These aspirations are aimed at joining the group of “great powers”, bringing the aura of stable centres of capitalism around which the global economy revolves. Yet here the vague term *grandes puissances*, in common use since the Vienna Congress of 1815, best characterizes the concept of superpower-ness captured in a review of related theory performed by Agnieszka Bógdał-Brzezińska as based on “the necessity of possessing a relative superfluency of power, developed in such a manner as to become an instrument effectively influencing the international environment”². Eventual success in achieving such

2 A. Bógdał-Brzezińska, “Mocarstwowość w teorii stosunków międzynarodowych” [in] M. Sułek, J. Symonides (ed.), *Państwo w teorii i praktyce stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warsaw 2009, p. 98.