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## Globalization as a Tool for Imperialism

‘IMPERIALISM’ IS REPLACING ‘globalization’ as the paramount buzzword in politics. With the United States’ aspiration for empire and with its growing hegemonic worldwide (or nearly worldwide) control (or attempt at control), we have the US coming to have the mantle of empire, with increasing unabashedness. From being in 1945 an empire that did not acknowledge itself as such, we are coming to have an empire that takes itself to be one, takes this to be a good thing for it to be (for itself and for the world) and acknowledges its imperial *right* to be so. With American imperialism, we have an empire that, while proclaiming propagandistically the fundamental value of freedom, is becoming increasingly dominating and a growing menace to the world both within its official borders and worldwide. It is, in spite of its ideology of freedom, an extensive underminer of freedom. This makes its paeans to freedom gross hypocrisy, pure propagandistic hype.

Some (rather fortuitously and stipulatively) believe we have here empire *without* imperialism. But actual literal worldwide scope or not, imperialism and empire go together like hand and glove. We have long known—at least since Paul Baran’s and Paul Sweezy’s *Monopoly Capital*<sup>1</sup>—that we can and do have imperialism without official colonies. The United States without colonies (never a colonial power) has client states and comprador states galore, which have functional roles very like colonies. And the former colonial powers usually keep a powerful presence and a capitalist control presence in their former colonies, e.g., France in the Ivory

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<sup>1</sup> A. Paul Baran and M. Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966; Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1968).

Coast. After decolonization, we have in many places continued control and domination without the old legal apparatus. 'Imperialism without colonies' is not an oxymoron.

Imperialism arose as an attempt to meet the crises caused by capitalist overaccumulation. Such crises obtain where surpluses of capital and labour power occur without there being any apparent way to bring them together profitably. A way must be found to absorb these surpluses caused by overaccumulation. The classic theories of imperialism developed (though differently) by Lenin and Luxemburg took, as David Harvey put it, "geographical expansion and spatial reorganization" as a way out that would (they thought) for a time save capitalism.<sup>2</sup> And this gave a rationale for the rise of imperialism. Contemporary global capitalism has not found that sufficient; there has been a chronic and enduring problem of overaccumulation that led to various capitalist crises leading to repeated devaluations (but usually not simultaneously) all over the world.<sup>3</sup> The United States might have kept them away from its shores and indeed sometimes its capital might profit from these devaluations. More generally, US capital responded to this increasing economic threat to its hegemony by (a) becoming more openly an imperialism backed by overwhelming military might and (b) responding to its inability to accumulate through expanded reproduction on a sustained basis by moving (following a new imperialist strategy) to attempts to *accommodate by dispossession* (something I will return to later). This Harvey takes to be the hallmark of the New Imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

Neo-liberal globalizers have celebrated the moveability of capital. Some capital is indeed very moveable. Finance capital, for example, and production lines for some things are readily moveable and *some* fixed capital is also geographically moveable, such as, to use Harvey's example, machinery that can easily be unbolted from its moorings and taken elsewhere. But he adds significantly, "The rest is so fixed in the land that it cannot be moved without being destroyed. Aircraft are mobile but the airports to which they fly are not."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this kind of fixed capital is a very extensive and crucial part of the capitalist world.

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, "The 'New Imperialism': Accumulation by Dispossession," in *The Socialist Register 2003: The New Imperial Challenge*, ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003) 42.

<sup>3</sup> "The 'New Imperialism'" 63-83.

<sup>4</sup> "The 'New Imperialism'" 64.

<sup>5</sup> "The 'New Imperialism'" 64.

In trying to solve problems of overaccumulation, capitalism, with imperialism as its political arm, tried territorial expansion. But here we have a double edged sword. New territories indeed open up a place for overaccumulated capital to go. But much of it will be fixed new capitalism (various produced infrastructures), and will tie up capital for a long time in a way that will also delay profitability for a long time. But, in addition, as Harvey well puts it:

If capital does move out, it leaves behind a trail of devastation (the de-industrialization experienced in the 1970s and 1980s in the heartlands of capitalism, like Pittsburgh and Sheffield, as well as many other parts of the world, such as Bombay, illustrates the point). If accumulated capital does not or cannot move, on the other hand, then it stands to be devalued directly.... [C]apital necessarily creates a physical landscape in its own image at one point in time to have to destroy it at some later point in time as it pursues geographical expansion and temporal displacements as solutions to crises in overaccumulating to which it is regularly prone. Thus is the history of creative destruction (with all manner of deleterious social and environmental consequences) written in the evolution of the physical and social landscape of capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

This is an iron-cage for capitalism. Whichever way it turns it does not escape crises; and they intensify with time and with the development of the productive forces. Capitalism is driven toward imperialism, but this yields no stable resolutions for capitalism. It gives us no assurances that these crises will not lead to conditions ripe for capitalist undermining. Yet it has continued to survive. Often the only way out, inside capitalism, is by devaluation, as when productive companies in countries such as Thailand and Indonesia are forced into bankruptcy by the IMF or the World Bank and are forced to sell off their assets—assets which but for this manipulation would have a considerable value—at fire sale prices, thus giving the multi-national firms principally located in the United States, Germany or Japan a considerable profit through forced dispossession of Second World or Third World companies. It solves, at least temporarily, monopoly capitalism's overaccumulation problems, and helps them safely to accumulate by dispossession, but at a terrible cost to the Second World and Third World. The major capitalist empires pillage the rest of the world by accumulation by dispossession, in the hope that, by that means, they can sustain their capitalism through expanded reproduction. Here we can see how capitalism continues to generate imperialism. It is understandable that this capitalism has been called vulture capitalism.

<sup>6</sup> "The New Imperialism" 66.



I shall now, shifting gears, argue (1) that there is nothing bad about globalization *per se*—that what is bad (harmful to most human beings) is *capitalist* globalization—and (2) that it is imperialism, and not even capitalist globalization, that is now the most threatening to our world. Globalization, whether capitalist or otherwise, should be seen as the transcendence (rather than the mere crossing or opening) of borders. Globalization involves an increasing spread of transborder or supraborder or supraterritorial relations with an increasing penetrating of the economies of nations by multinational or transnational corporations. Multi-nationals remain nation-based and the number of genuinely transnational corporations are now (2005) few, but they, along with the multi-nationals, are all transterritorial. Imperialism (if we look below the surface) is a process of accumulation on a global scale—in modern times principally capitalist accumulation. With it goes political control of the world (or large parts of the world) by a dominant state or sometimes a few states or, more fundamentally, by an increasingly global capitalism with its powerful client states.<sup>7</sup> Such a dominant state (or states) in contemporary times, attuned to such global capitalist interests, increasingly dominates and directly or indirectly rules the world, using capitalist globalization as a tool and capitalist states (including the imperialist state or states) as facilitators and sustainers of capitalist accumulation, frequently on a global scale. It is this form of globalization that is so threatening to most of the peoples of the globe. We have with this not the disappearance of the state. Rather, the state (even imperialist states and even a thoroughly dominant 'super state' such as the United States) is becoming less sovereign and is increasingly experiencing a considerable democratic deficit. The rooster who rules the roost is global capitalism with its agents, global capitalists. It uses *an* imperialist state or *the* imperialist state as its central instrument of control, including the monopoly on what is considered as the legitimate use of violence, whether it is just *an* imperialist state in its own domain or more broadly *the* imperialist state (if there is one) in an indefinitely wide domain that seeks to become ever wider.



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<sup>7</sup> In that respect even the US Imperial state is a client state: a client of global capitalism, particularly capitalism with a US capitalist orientation. Remember that America's business is business.

When I gave a seminar in the Winter Term of 2003 on "Globalization and Global Justice" I used in the first half of the term two set texts: Jan Aart Scholte's *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*<sup>8</sup> and James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer's *Globalization Unmasked*.<sup>9</sup> These are two very different books and I deliberately chose them to set them off against each other. Scholte, who teaches International Studies, carefully and analytically characterizes globalization in his book and in several articles. He elaborates a conception of globalization, traces the historical course of globalizing trends and "examines its causes and traces the consequences of this reorganization of spaces for wider social structures."<sup>10</sup> Petras and Veltmeyer, both sociologists with extensive work in International Development Studies, write a very different book from Scholte's. It, like Noam Chomsky's political work, is intensely and penetratingly political and argues that globalization functions as a capitalist ideology: that it functions as a mystifying device to further the interests of the new capitalist imperialism—an imperialism without formal colonies. Moreover, and importantly, it is, they have it, such an imperialism and not globalization itself that is the crucial phenomenon shaping our societies and deeply affecting our lives. Globalizers, by contrast, portray globalizing as phenomena that new technologies create and that will in effect provide for both neo-liberal capitalism and, *they claim*, for plain people for their commonweal. It facilitates global capitalism, which with its free trade, free markets and free flows of capital in global circuits, is crucially instrumental, so the claim goes, in liberating us, making, globalizers say, a far better world possible.

I agree with Petras and Veltmeyer that this talk of globalizers is ideological talk: indeed pervasive and pernicious ideological talk. But I do not agree that all the conceptualizations of globalization can be reduced to such ideological talk or characterized as ideological, though, to repeat, I do agree that some conceptualizations of globalization are useful ideological devices for capitalism. In contrast to Petras and Veltmeyer, and with Scholte, I believe that globalization is a new phenomenon (newer than imperialism) that needs to be carefully studied and not *just* as an ideology, though surely its ideological functions in our societies needs to be highlighted.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *Globalization Unmasked* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, Zed Books, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* 207.



'Globalization' is used in many different ways. Scholte cuts through this and provides us with a clear and useful characterization of globalization. I shall follow him here. Indeed, since the end of the Second World War, there has been an increasing and deepening global interdependence. There have been increased movements between countries of goods, investments, money, messages, ideas and people. But this has happened before on a somewhat comparable scale—think of the last quarter of the nineteenth century—and is just *internationalization*. It does not yield a distinctive sense of 'globalization.' Similar things are true for regarding globalization as an increase in openness of borders and relations between states. This is covered by the phenomena of *liberalization*—something that is also not new.

It is better to see globalization as *increasing deterritorialization through the transcendence of borders, the compression of space and time, and the coming to regard the whole world as one place*. We get a growing transcendence of borders (and not a mere crossing or opening of borders) when social relations become less tied to territorial frameworks. Scholte puts it this way:

From this perspective borders are not so much crossed or opened as transcended. Here 'global' phenomena are those which extend across widely dispersed locations *simultaneously* and can move between places anywhere on the earth pretty much *instantaneously*. Territorial distance and territorial borders hold limited significance in these circumstances: the global becomes a single 'place' in its own right.<sup>11</sup>

Time compression as well as spatial compression is crucial for globalization. As Scholte puts it:

Globalization refers to processes whereby social relations acquire relatively distanceless and borderless qualities, so that human lives are increasingly played out in the world as a single place. Social relations—that is, the countless and complex ways that people interact with and affect each other—are more and more being conducted and organized on the basis of a planetary unit. By the same token country locations, and in particular the boundaries between territorial states, are in some important senses becoming less central to our lives, although they do remain significant. Globalization is thus an ongoing trend whereby the world has—in many respects and at a generally accelerating rate—become a relatively borderless social sphere.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Global Capitalism and the State," *International Affairs* 73 (1997): 431. Italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> "The Globalization of World Politics," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. John Baylis and Steve Smith (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1997) 14–15.

And as Scholte adds:

Global connections (for example, satellite newscasts) are effectively distanceless and instantaneous. Global phenomena can extend across the world at the same time and can move between places in no time; they are in this sense suprateritorial.<sup>13</sup>



Globalization is surely an economic phenomenon, but it is not only an economic phenomenon. It, in one way or another, is at work in almost every aspect of our social life. Many people, particularly in the wealthier parts of the world, have nearly immediate contact with each other. Communications have increasingly become more globalized. Moreover, TV programs and films become increasingly the same worldwide. There is an increase in transborder networks: great multinational corporations straddle the world, associations and regulatory agencies also straddle the world. Ecologically, through climate change and other forms of pollution, and exhaustion of fish stocks and other natural resources, we have phenomena which have no borders: the effect is often worldwide. It should also be noted that global factories have come into being where various stages of manufacture take place (processing of materials, assembly of parts, finishing and quality control) across several countries, sometimes at great distance from each other in a single production line. It is also the case, as was early noted in the globalization debate, that financial transactions are often made instantaneously and without border controls: countries in important respects are losing control of their own currency and with that their fiscal policy. They cannot control many transactions of financial capital. This results in a considerable deficit in democracy. Increasingly, people all over the world—though in the wealthier countries more so than elsewhere—are becoming conscious of the world as one place. Globalization should be conceived as suprateritoriality, though we should not forget that we live in a *globalizing not a fully globalized* world. There is still a great difference between the perceptions and life conditions of a typical Bolivian coca grower and a typical Montreal banker or for that matter between a typical Montreal banker and a typical Montreal skinhead.



<sup>13</sup> "The Globalization of World Politics" 15.

Whatever we want to say about the relative comparative importance of imperialism and globalization as a driving force of social change and the structuring of our life-world, it is important to see that the above characterization of globalization is, at least in no obvious way, if at all, ideological. It describes a trend that is going on in our world. It does not, left to itself, mystify our social relations. It may accurately describe something relatively new in the world which deeply affects our social relations, and in our capitalist societies—and here it functions ideologically—answers to the interests of certain classes (or if you will certain peoples placed in a certain way) and harms the interests of other classes (or other people differently placed). To put it crudely it may be good for the rich and bad for the poor, not only in the South but all over the world. This, particularly when the poor, given in many places the power of the media, have considerable difficulty in seeing this, and are rather systematically led to believe just the opposite, or at least that things are as good as they, as a matter of hard fact, can be for them. When things like this are believed in capitalist societies, we have ideology answering to the interests of the capitalist class. But globalization taken as supraterritoriality need not be ideology and people such as Scholte who so characterize globalization are not practicing or unwittingly giving expression to ideology, i.e., they are not engaging in mystification that answers to the class interests of certain people. If we ever get and stably sustain a classless world, we still would, under contemporary conditions, given technological advances and the like, have, in the relevant sense Scholte specifies, at least a relatively deterritorialized world. But, without classes, we would not have an ideologized world. In viewing globalization as deterritorialization we need not be making an ideological remark or taking up an ideological stance. We need not have a scheme which answers to the interests of a certain class while mystifying and harming the interests of another class. The phenomena we described as globalization may function *in our capitalist world* ideologically, but globalization, as I have characterized it, is not necessarily ideological itself. It *may* be a relatively surface description of things with imperialism digging deeper while historical materialism digs still deeper. But the 'may' deserves special attention here. There is no purpose- or practice-independent place to stop here. Where we stop depends on what we wish to explain, though it no doubt is more important to explain some things than others.

If the Soviet Union had won the Cold War globalization would still be going on, but at a slower pace because the Soviet technology was less developed. In addition to neo-liberal capitalism, globalization is compatible with corporate capitalism or with monopoly capitalism. Suppose we



get (as Kant dreamed of) global governance, either in the form of a global federation or of a world-state; we here too get something, whether capitalist or post-capitalist, which is compatible with globalization. With either a global federation or a world-state, we still would have globalization in our contemporary world; as we would as well with a genuinely democratic socialism or indeed with a quasi-socialist statism, which the Soviet Union was—socialist in rhetoric, but just statist post-capitalist in reality.



What anti-globalizers are really set against (whether they recognize it or not) is imperialism, and most particularly capitalist imperialism and the imperialists' use of globalization increasingly to exploit people, though some people are exploited more harshly than others—for example, Colombian poor workers more harshly than Danish poor workers. Capitalism's relentless pursuit of surplus accumulation, a persistent and tenacious pursuit of profit, is endemic to it. It wouldn't be capitalism if it did not do that. To efficiently attain this for capitalism under conditions of modernity, globalization is a vital tool. That capitalist imperialism accumulates now by dispossession (principally in the Third World) does not gainsay that.<sup>14</sup> But globalization would be something in some way useful—sometimes useful in an oppressive way—for any contemporary social order. It just goes with modernity. In a social democratic or socialist world order it could be useful in extending emancipation. What the vast mass of the population do not need to have is neo-liberal capitalist globalization or even corporate or monopoly capitalist globalization. We would have, to repeat, globalization in some form in any contemporary industrialized society ('post-industrial' society if you will). But it perhaps need not take the pernicious form it does now and that indeed it would have to take, to some degree, in all possible capitalist orders. But here things could be more or less bad. After all, Norway is not Mexico. But even *if* capitalism in some form is for us here to stay, if it is inevitable, or if we must pay too high a price to be rid of it, we still need not have the severely pernicious globalization we have now. But empirically (historically) inevitable or not, it will be, unless things are radically changed, the globalization of a global capitalism. Moreover, where we stand, the life that various people know around the world, unless they are very isolated, is life with imperialism. It is something that exploits in varying degrees the peoples of the world and, a few capitalist elites and some

<sup>14</sup> See David Harvey, "The 'New Imperialism'."

of their high-level facilitators apart, it oppresses; often, particularly in the Third World, it deeply and savagely oppresses them. Imperialism controls masses of people who in such a world must live such a life.

People are exploited in many ways and even in a democratic socialism there could be *some* exploitation.<sup>15</sup> But the exploitation and oppression in an imperialist world is, to put it minimally, far greater than it need be. It goes far beyond what *may* be an unavoidable necessity. This is an old story many times told by the Left, and Petras and Veltmeyer tell it very well, particularly concerning Latin America. The business of the United States is business and, in an ever tighter and more comprehensive fashion, the US imperialist state, serving global capitalism, is extending its control over the world. It bullies those, in one way or another, who dare to oppose this order. And those whom it cannot bully into submission it destroys or at least tries to. As in the late nineteenth century when Britain 'ruled the waves,' now the United States rules, functioning as a conduit for a global and globalizing capitalism: an American capitalism that increasingly pockets the world, though sometimes as in Iraq at a price for the imperialist power itself.

Sometimes there are several imperialist states competing with each other and sometimes even going to war with each other. We saw this in the First and Second World Wars. But that is not our situation now. Indeed, given what warfare has become, we are increasingly unlikely to get such a thing. The United States, however, is the sole imperialist superpower and it is increasingly controlling the globe. With the Soviet Union gone, it has no present competition. Perhaps somewhere down the line the EU in partnership with Russia or China or both will become a competing global power, but now that is a long way off. And such powers under contemporary conditions are not likely to go to war with each other. War between *such powers* has become too dangerous.

As has been frequently argued, there are now three major trading blocks: (1) Europe and Africa with Germany as the principal 'partner'; (2) North and South America with the United States as the principal 'partner'; and (3) the Asian ring with Japan as the principal 'partner.' But this situation is fluid. China, for example, could replace Japan or come to work (in spite of old animosities) in partnership with Japan. While there is, as of now, no unified and integrated capitalist world order—no capitalist central

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<sup>15</sup> See Robert J. Van der Veen, "Can Socialism be Non-exploitative?" and Phillippe Van Parijs, "Exploitation and the Libertarian Challenge," in *Modern Theories of Exploitation*, ed. Andrew Reeve (London: Sage Publications, 1987) 111–37 and 80–110 respectively.

committee—we are increasingly going in that direction. The United States, in the name of its business elites and of the business elites (increasingly on a worldwide scale) aligned with them, is increasingly controlling things economic, political and even cultural. But globalization need not be a globalization facilitating that order or even a capitalism. It need not take an imperial facilitating and sustaining form. There *could* be a capitalism of the blocs competing with each other with no one ruling the roost. But that is not our present condition. And even with such competing powers—given the increased risk of world wars—there could be a better scenario than the capitalist imperialist one. But that aside, what most deeply threatens world well-being *now* is imperialism as instantiated by the United States. We could *in other circumstances* have a globalization with a human face and *perhaps* even a capitalism with a somewhat human face (as in Sweden). What most centrally we have to resist is imperialism. Globalization, under different circumstances, could be helpful or at least benign. There could even be an anti-capitalist globalization from below. But, to repeat, that is not the world we live in now. The world we live in now is one of increasing US—and with it global capitalist—domination.