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ACTA Interview with Max Ajl

27.02.2024

Reflection on Imperialism Today



Sources: Acta Zone [Photo: Still from S. Kubrick's film "Dr. Strangelove" (1964)]

Translated from French for Rebellion by Beatriz Morales Bastos

Rebellion Note: This article was published in its original French edition on March 15, 2022. We believe that it contributes to a reflection on the concept of imperialism that we have been carrying out in Rebelión with numerous articles.

In this incisive interview, Max Ajl proposes a definition of the concept of imperialism fed by contemporary Marxist works, while analysing what is at stake in the world situation, from the rise of China to the crisis of Western imperialism and, of course, the contradictory role of Russia. In doing so, he formulates several ways out of the theoretical confusion of our camp and relaunches a militant anti-imperialist dynamic around the slogan of the abolition of NATO.

ACTA : We see a huge amount of confusion on the left about the question of imperialism. Let's start there: how would you define the imperialism from a theoretical point of view?

Max Aji: When we talk about imperialism, we have to make, on the one hand, a On the one hand, you have to pay attention to to historical stages and periodization. One difficulty lies in in the fact that imperialism is often understood at the same time as something that states do and as a global feature of the world capitalist system.

In general We can understand imperialism as the set of processes in which imperialism takes place. within the world system that produce a polarized accumulation. Therefore, imperialism is when a state takes control of the world. use-values or of the productive forces of another state or of another state. social formation with the aim of maintaining a dominant position within the system of accumulation on a global scale. When When we say "dominant position" we mean net importers. This therefore excludes some countries, including countries as big and powerful countries like China, Russia and Brazil.

These definitions they do not necessarily correspond to what Lenin, for example, wrote In his celebrated political treatise on imperialism, although alluded to that way of understanding it. They're closer than they want wrote when he analysed national and colonial issues at the same time. To speak of "*the colonial and financial subjugation of the great majority of the world's population by the minority of the most insignificant capitalist countries, rich and advanced.*" And I think it's also close to what Cabral said about "*the denial of the historical process of the peoples dominated by the violent usurpation of the freedom of development of the national productive forces.*"

We can, therefore, We will take away two pertinent aspects of these definitions. The The first is national domination and the second is domination within a system of polarized accumulation and maintains a dominant position within a system of polarized accumulation. Within the framework of this way of understanding it more and of any historical period, there are mechanisms that sustain this polarized accumulation of value: occupation and primitive accumulation, land theft, drainage and the slave trade in an earlier period. In the period neocolonial, imperialism manifested itself in abundance through unequal exchanges and increasingly unequal commodity chains Extensive. Nowadays it also manifests itself through a militarized dollarization backed by the Pentagon (the United States). petrodollars) and for the outright destruction of entire groups of peripheral use values, particularly in the Arab world, but also in other places, where industry has been destroyed and agriculture, and the Arab populations have been turned

into refugees. "Violent usurpation" does not mean that these values or human lives and land, directly produce the surplus value through the process of production. It may be that the murder, colonialism, *de-development* (*de-development en or* the war itself to serve the process of accumulation on a global scale. This goes hand in hand with more "economic", such as unequal exchange and overexploitation which, of course, are occurring.

The merit of this The approach is that we go beyond the approaches "strictly" economists who focus on capital and the export of capital. Focus on the polarized accumulation and control of the productive forces -even through destruction- leads us not to focus on processes such as the export of capital which, in fact, are for capitalism in the era of commodity flows. transnational capitals, even in the periphery.

ACTA: What is the current state of the Marxist debate on the Marxist question? imperialism? Do you how it has been renewed in The last few years the concept of imperialism?

Max Ajl: There is a very wide range of sophisticated theoretical works that range from John Smith and Intan Suwandi on labor arbitration, the Price Chain Manipulation and Value Engineering to the works of Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik on the Defending the Value of Money and the Role of Hand Reserves in the continuity of the world system, the role of the human lives evaporated and murdered as an input of the law of the value, a theory substantially developed by Ali Kadri. There's There was also a lively Latin American debate on the theory of dependence, especially on the role of super-exploitation, a debate in which Jaime Osorio plays a prominent role. And in the In the African region, there is a vast body of work on systemic dynamics of the new gold rush and the role of the semi-proletariat in the stabilization of accumulation on a global scale, associated with mainly to the school of the *Agrarian South* Agrarian]. And there's work that's empirically brilliant, if uneven theoretically, on the unequal appropriation of labor and biophysical resources on a global scale, grouped around studies on ecologically unequal exchange.

On the other hand, debate? There is no debate Why London Marxism has not been involved in the work of Sam Moyo or Samir Amin, even if it was organizing commemorative retrospectives? Leaving *Review Aside of African Political Economy and Development and Change*, It would even be difficult to be aware of its existence. If there is A "debate" is between substantially correct ideas and theories (like the ones mentioned above) and a kind of chimerical "theory" of imperialism, stripped of its Leninist essence, i.e., of its ability to make the centre-periphery dynamics legible or dominant-dominated within the world system. In this regard, [let's](#) look at

the [battle](#) between David Harvey and [John Smith](#), or the non-debate between Harvey on the one hand and [Moyo, Paris Yeros and Praveen Jha](#) on [the](#) other (because he didn't answer them). In response to this, We see, for example, [in The blog of the Verso](#) Publishing House, that a platform is given to Harvey to express himself on the geopolitics. In which domain of rational-scientific debate is there a Would you offer a platform to someone who doesn't know what they're talking about? I do not know This is a scientific debate. It's a reflection of the power dynamics, that is, a whole part of the left The West is not interested in a serious discussion of imperialism.

ACTA : It is relatively common to read that after two decades of world hegemony after the break-up of the USSR, the U.S. imperialism is in crisis, a crisis that seems to be symbolized last summer's debacle in Afghanistan. ¿What is at stake and how would you say the Western imperialism in the last period?

Max Aji: You have to distinguish two processes when you discuss this idea of imperial "crisis" or "decline," an idea that is partially chimerical. In the first place, imperialism as We have defined it before, that is, the relation of domination between a minority that usurps control of the productive forces of the and the States that crystallize this practice of domination, It is not in crisis in the short or medium term. The U.S. Dollar it remains the world's reserve currency. Apparently, the United States The United States retains the ability to make the world pay for its wars burning its own productive resources and its own wealth, also in the heart of central Europe. And the degree of polarization and the relative accumulation of wealth by the U.S.-based or owned multinationals and of the American billionaires, is more beyond comprehension. Consequently, imperialism as a political practice of domination of the world's resources by Part of a wealthy minority works very well.

On the other hand, there are a powerful countervailing tendency. The rise of China, which is Going back to its 1949 revolution, it modifies the coordinates of power and globally in a profound and perhaps irreversible way. Yes It is admitted that imperialism is based on an unequal accumulation of wealth and rights to resources, including the hand and the commodities obtained from the land, imperialism as a structural element of the global system, in particular the U.S. imperialism simply cannot survive the boom of China. It could do so if China were willing to crush the social reproduction of their working class, but this is not the case. The China's positioning in terms of trade with the United States improvement in parallel with Chinese wages. Therefore, the imperialism as part of a

historical social system of Polarized accumulation will not be able to continue, and then what?

There is also a political counterpoint to this trend. The Imperialism of the Dollar goes hand in hand with a policy whose objective is to It is the total collapse of peripheral social formations. Yet this policy is incapable again and again, in Yemen, Syria and Iran, to achieve their maximum objectives, while the forces of national independence or national liberation not only they win consistent victories on the battlefield against United States. United States and its representatives, but are eroding its advantage (as in Palestine, too).

The Shaft Israeli-American is no longer in a position to invade the Gaza Strip because of the technical capacity and Organizational Resistance Organization: A Remarkable Fact That Very Few It is often talked about, much less presented, as a real step forward for the Palestinian National Liberation After Decades of Defeat, a Breakthrough supported by regional military cooperation. In addition, some of the these forces, as in Yemen, are beginning to adapt a program social-developmental. As a friend likes to say, "*everything is going to happen.*"

ACTA: Many people, including people in our camp, speak of a "Russian imperialism" and establish a kind of equivalence between this "Russian imperialism" and Western imperialism (under the general idea that "all imperialisms" should be fought indiscriminately). Of course, the invasion of Ukraine has provided new arguments for this trend. Would you say that Russia is an imperialist state? How do you analyze your recent military projection, from Syria to Ukraine?

Max Aji: Russia is a middle-level capitalist power. In most cases, the analyses I've read about Putin's agenda, the interests of the "oligarchs" (in the hallucinogenic imagination of the warmongers Westerners: Rich Non-Westerners Are Given Special Names as an oligarch, sheikh, etc., even when these foreigners *of upper* class would be destitute in the class structure of the United States) on Ukraine are hardly among the triggers of war. It is true that political systems they always serve as a mediator for the interests of capital monopolist. Direct control of the State by the State is not common. of the leaders of monopoly capital, as is the case in the United States. United. But in this case we have a profoundly deterritorialized from those who hold the wealth. Much of what that is considered an export of capital is constituted essentially by these Russians of the ruling class who deposit their assets outside the ruble zone. In fact, there are often elements in those militarily that are targeted by the United States, such as Iran and Russia, which are

wielded not so much with a view to territorial expansion, but to normalization within the geo-economy dominated by United States. Several friends tell me that the day the war in Syria, some government businessmen might be open to restarting exchanges with the West.

So, to go back To the definitions: imperialism is concerned with accumulation unequal and its political regulation; Broadly speaking, we can say that states are "imperialist" if they share in the fruits of unequal accumulation and support the political architecture of the uneven accumulation. On the one hand, Russia is in Ukraine for a mix of self-defense against NATO intrusion under the prism of a crisis of internal legitimacy for Putin. On the other hand, GDP and Russia's per capita wealth is between one-fourth and one-quarter fortieth of those of NATO states. Russia, which as a most of the peripheral states supply labour to the global supply chains, does not benefit in any way from the imperialist division of labor.

Within the On the radical left, there may be divergences of opinion on how to label Russia's actions (which I find disastrous for the Ukrainian and Russian working classes, although you could bet that even more nefarious would be the attacks suffered by Russia by part of asymmetrical neo-Nazi irregulars crossing its borders from an increasingly armed Ukraine absorbed by NATO). With All in all, I think we should take this argument about the Russian imperialism, but only in a specific sense. Take it in Serious: State Foreign Policy Actions Take Place Harmful. Not seriously: why should it be identified as imperialism? The label of imperialism is the reflection of a Western geoculture that reviews its crimes and, above all, is unable to reflect on the colonial legacy and the present imperial. How Russia's invasion of Ukraine, preceded by an aggressive encirclement of NATO (a fact acknowledged by everyone from Joe Biden to John Measheimer) is tantamount to holocausts in Yemen, Iraq, and Vietnam, where the "threat" is He was directed against the U.S. political regulation of the accumulation and exploitation on a global scale? They are not threats Similar. Making them equivalent is a form of holocaust denial.

Russia's role It is, therefore, contradictory. The war with Ukraine means the levelling up of the social infrastructure, the increase in the nationalists against the class elements in both societies, the increasing repression of the left and loss of life. In Syria this occurred when the alternative was the destruction of the State on the part of NATO, a situation of pure permanent war and the semi-permanent loss of the role of the state in the social reproduction. This aspect is not present in Russia. Maybe Semi-peripheral capitalist self-

defense may work, but it seems much less important to theorize about what Russia is doing than it is to theorize about Russia. to press for negotiations in order to stop the bloodshed while seizing the opportunity to raise the banner of the abolition of NATO again.

ACTA : A similar phenomenon can be observed with regard to China. In this case, the focus is not so much on the military dimension (so far China has not bombed anyone) but on the economic projection (the new Silk Roads, etc.). Do you think China's foreign policy can be described as imperialist? How should communists relate to China in the context of the new Cold War with the United States, which will undoubtedly determine this century?

Max Ajl: No, for three reasons. First of all, according to almost all By serious estimates, China is a net exporter (although its exchanges of working hours with Africa and some countries Asian countries are positive). This means that China's rise is not possible in parallel with a polarized accumulation at scale worldwide. There is no foreign periphery large enough to can be exploited, so the old concepts won't be useful to make sense of the new direction of history. Second, To understand the orientation of our social system is not to be understood. it is useful to forget that, unlike the United States and the European Union, In Europe, primitive accumulation in China has been internal and not in China. Hundreds of millions of people are trafficked of slaves and colonialism (of settlement). Thirdly, China does not stage military coups or invade nations which are constituent elements of the accumulation of foreign debts, which are constituent elements of the Polarized; At the end of the day, polarized accumulation means that self-centred development in the most vulnerable countries must be prevented. of the pole.

That said, I'm not convinced that there is only one communist position on the China. Communists in the Philippines deal with a China that trades arms with the Duterte regime, as well as the communists of Palestine meets with a China that trades arms with Israel. Without However, many communists in Latin America (and it is probably the dominant position) argue that China's rise opens up new lines of and other leverage margins beneficial to forms of sovereign national development. And anyone who claims to know the future of the China itself lies, which, in turn, redefines the parameters of the above considerations.

ACTA: In recent weeks we have seen a reconfiguration of the role of the European Union, which is now adopting a more clearly militaristic position. The European Union has also recently decided to deliver weapons to Ukraine, which is a first. To

what extent can this renewed idea of a "Europe of defence" constitute an escape for European states in the face of the increasing questioning of their respective imperialisms (as is the case with Macron and *Françafrique*)?

Max Ajl : It turns out It's hard to say to what extent It is a outsourcing of U.S. imperialist policy to the United States. States of the *Union European* and European To what extent is It's about A Will independent of the *Union European*, but most of the times it seems to be the first case, since The U.S. follows the Syrian-Libyan model of leading from behind (a very effective model for confusing sectors progressives in the U.S. and the *Union European Union*, although in Europe's warmongering fever doesn't seem to need a lot of confusion).

ACTA: One last question: in your opinion, what are the most urgent tasks of the militant anti-imperialist people living in the capitalist center today?

Max Ajl: Overthrow our NATO-linked governments.

Max Ajl is a rural sociologist based in Tunisia, a research associate at the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment, and the Rural Sociology Group at Wageningen University. His most recent book is [*A People's Green New Deal*](#), published by Pluto Press.

Source: <https://acta.zone/penser-limperialisme-aujourd'hui-avec-max-ajl/>

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Rebellion 26.02.2024