

**Some thoughts on Lenin's *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*
and twenty-first century imperialism.**

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Lenin's notion of Imperialism has long been the classic reference for the Marxist understanding of the phenomenon. A Marxist analysis of contemporary imperialism or more generally the international situation should identify which parts of Lenin's analysis are relevant today and which are not, or less so. Here I would like to briefly comment on 1) Lenin's ideas in general and 2) the connections between imperialism, its role in global inequality, exploitation, misery, and contemporary markets. The question of markets is I feel both central to Lenin's thinking and key to grasping the similarities and differences between imperialism in Lenin's time and our own.

Lenin's notion of imperialism was a lot more than "uninvited intervention into the affairs of others." In fact, his notion expressed in pamphlet form under the title of *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*, published in 1916, in the middle of the imperialist slaughter was both an explanation for the war and an analysis of contemporary capitalism, two phenomenon he saw as intimately tied to one another. As an excellent piece of Marxist analysis, it centers its analysis at the intersection of Marxist economic thought and the actual state of capitalism at it existed at the time. Context was therefore key for Lenin as it should be for all using the Marxist method.

What in Lenin's analysis is still relevant?

Lenin as the subtitle suggested saw imperialism as a stage of capitalism. That is why we refer to earlier forms of north-south exploitation by Europe as *colonial* as opposed to *imperialist*. The colonists were interested in gold, silver, raw materials not for production but for direct, mostly elite use value, issues of ideological hegemony (forced conversion to Catholicism), and military position. They were *not* looking for an outlet to sell goods of which they produced little. They were colonists. The land grab by the major European bourgeois states in the nineteenth century differed somewhat. They were still looking for military bases, souls (at least they *said* so), but now also raw materials to fuel the industries of the second industrial revolution (electrical, chemical, automobile) and markets. This made them imperialists. The question of markets is key to Lenin's thinking in *Imperialism* and is a great place for us to start thinking about the ways capitalism and imperialism have changed. Here are a few quick thoughts.

Lenin's analysis is set in the historical context of an expanding European and north American capitalist production. The first industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries involved a vast expansion of industrial production particularly cheap, factory-made textiles and clothing. As the domestic market became saturated, industrial capitalists, particularly English looked to the European-wide market. When those markets became saturated, they looked further, overseas, mostly south. India was attractive to England as a vast market for clothing and textile produced in England. Along the way the less efficient, had

powered looms of the Indian textile industry in Dacca was destroyed (perhaps the first deindustrialized area of the world). As mentioned above, by the second half of the nineteenth century they also needed raw materials for newly emerging industries. This drove them to colonize every remaining piece of Africa (the Portuguese colonized Mozambique and Angola in the 15th-16th centuries) in search of those markets, raw materials and military bases to defend them. So expanded markets, the creation of which was both inevitable given the use of coal and later electricity powered production coupled with capitalism's incessant need to grow and expand, was a key feature of capitalism at the time. The clash of interests led, according to Lenin's analysis to World War I.

Markets, Free trade, and Inter-Imperialist Competition Today

The role of markets in imperialism is much more complicated today and reveals tremendous contradictions in contemporary capitalism. Behind popular and scholarly definitions of globalization is the world of neo-liberal capitalism. Beginning in the 1980s, capitalist governments led by Reagan in the US, Kohl in Germany, and Thatcher in England returned to a brutal, no-holds barred form of early classical economics that would have made Adam Smith and David Ricardo proud. Neo-liberalism replaces protectionism with "free" markets, unrestricted by labor and environmental and indigenous rights and the laws that afforded a measure of protection. It has been a great accelerator of global inequality, misery, and the destruction of indigenous cultures and communities.

Neo-imperialism involves the continued control and exploitation of the global south in the post-colonial period (by the early 1960s most colonies had gained formal independence). As in Lenin's time capitalist firms need markets and raw materials in the formally colonized global south and have governments and military might behind them. *But the same free market policies that they defend make the protection of national markets impossible or extremely difficult.* This makes the contemporary situation different from that in which wrote his pamphlet and is one of the central contradictions of contemporary capitalism and imperialism. While the contradiction between the market and raw material needs of capitalist firms and the impossibility of carving out protected geographical markets makes today's post-colonial neo-Imperialism different from Lenin's time when the imperialists still held direct colonial control over much of the global south and its peoples, the fierce competition between capitalist multinational corporations and their governments makes future armed conflict and war a real possibility.

Evaluating Lenin's ideas on imperialism using the Marxist method of grounding analysis in the realities of contemporary capitalism will help us draw on and update our understanding of the international situation, the global class struggle, and our tasks as revolutionary internationalists.

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